

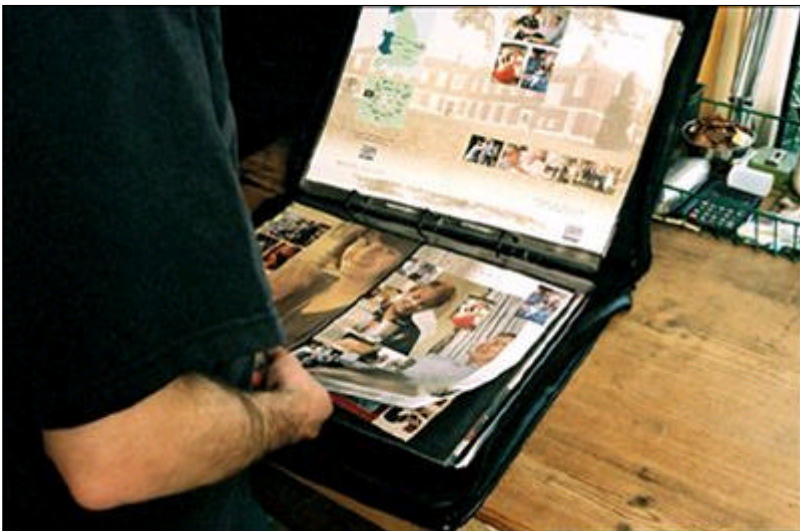
The Portfolio Jeremy Webb

Presenting your portfolio to hard-pressed art buyers and art directors in the commercial world is one of the most fraught and problematical tasks of a busy freelancer. On the assumption that you are comfortable and confident in the type of photographer you are, and that you have identified the market which you need to approach, your portfolio or 'book' must act as your shop window. Naturally, it must show your best work and stand out from the crowd, but this is only the beginning of a very fluid process which gives rise to a number of presentation issues that most photographers struggle with at some point.

Before you present your 'shop window' to the world, a number of key issues need to be resolved. For most photographers, preparation of the portfolio needs careful thought, and the following questions are often asked when the time comes to take a fresh look at your work.



Evidence of published work will convey professionalism so long as the images themselves are large enough within the overall layout.



Be Ruthless. It may be tempting to stick with old friends and favourites but do they really fit in with a consistent style?



Your black and white work could demonstrate versatility and creativity if you feel it is appropriate to show

How many images should my portfolio consist of?

Many of your potential clients will spend long hours every week looking at photographers books and making decisions on who gets what job and who misses out. There are no hard and fast rules here, but If you roll up with a crammed portfolio of 30 or more pictures you are in danger of sending a message which says that you don't know yourself what your best work is, and you are unable to express clearly what your strengths are. It signals a lack of confidence or self-criticism that could quite easily lose you the job. There are doubtless many photographers who have succeeded at portfolio meetings with a book bursting with 40 or more pictures, but this is likely to be the exception. I have found (when pressing for feedback from unsuccessful meetings) that it is generally when presenting between 12 - 20 images that the viewer will most remember your work and be receptive to your style.

It may be useful to you to keep a few extras in reserve. When presenting my A3 portfolio at a meeting, I often keep 3 or 4 reserves tucked teasingly inside either the front or back pocket so that they can be seen to be there but are not immediately visible to the viewer. If the viewer asks to see these I take this as a good sign but if they do not, then I'm not too bothered. This may seem a passive approach to selling but it gives me a signal that since I am not offering to show my client these images, their spontaneous and unprompted interest is a useful barometer to the way our meeting is progressing.

What type of portfolio should I use, and should I have more than one?

These days, photographers' books come in all shapes and sizes. I have heard of books being presented inside Lego suitcases, in rubber and stainless steel boxes and all manner of materials. The ideas may sound bizarre, comical, even stupid, but the photographers who choose to present their work in these forms are all trying to make a bold statement of style which screams 'Remember ME!' at the art buyer/director or whoever. In the life of a tired and jaded art buyer, a little light relief can immediately raise a smile and attention levels with it. The danger of this approach is obviously that it could all go horribly wrong and backfire - the packaging could be far more memorable than the contents.

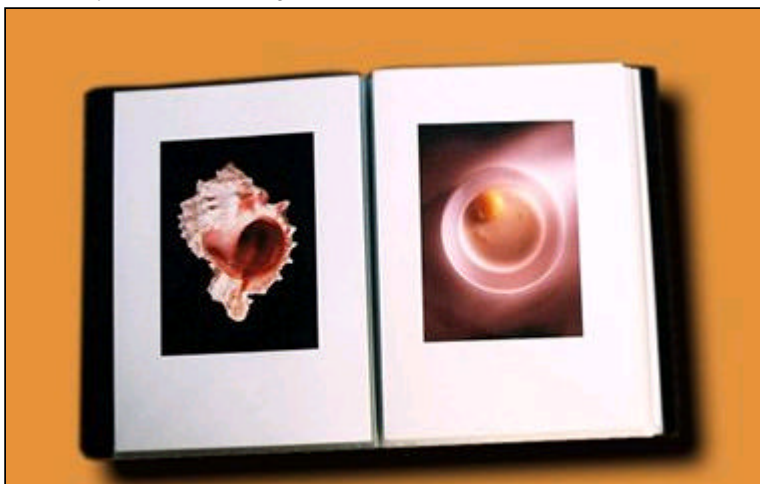
Unless your market attracts an unusually arty approach (such as cutting-edge fashion magazines for example) a little conservatism is called-for. There are plenty of presentation folders and binders which are stylish yet under-stated and (crucially) protective of their contents. Daler Rowney are probably the leading player in the UK for general purpose display books and art portfolios but there are many more besides.



An A4 presentation folder is just the right size for a busy office environment whereas an A3 binder might be more suited to a boardroom or corporate environment.



Keep it simple and straightforward. These 2 images are from a portfolio featuring some of my 'natural world' images.



Organising your portfolio can throw-up some interesting juxtapositions when placing photographs in sequences.

Some photographers have several portfolios, or make up a small number of hand-bound books to send out for an agreed period on loan. I use a combination of A3 folios and smaller A4-sized books and am constantly moving pictures between the two depending on my assessment of the clients requirements and the signal I want to send to the recipient. Of this type of portfolio case, I wouldn't dream of going any bigger. I've had meetings in tiny cramped offices with delicately-placed coffee cups and I remain staggered as to why art students these days attempt to take their A2 -sized portfolios to their first few meetings.

What is the ideal image size for the images in your portfolio?

If a single image on a page is strong enough to deserve a place in your portfolio, then let it breathe, let it sing out. Give it some space in which to sit. An A4-sized print (or thereabouts) will sit well within an A3 plain white page, raised slightly up from the centre. Too much space and the image looks lost and lonely, too little, and its communicative power is diminished. Responses from portfolio meetings I have had have encouraged me to present digital prints of 18cm height within an A4 page. Size does not count for everything here, ease of perusal and a confidence imparted through careful presentation can be so much more powerful than adopting a simplistic attitude of Biggest is Best.

How often should I change it?

In the 80's things used to be simple - my best images were all laminated (as was the fashion) and opened for viewing in any order from a nifty-looking briefcase. Now, like many other freelancers, I have several portfolios which reflect the varying needs of clients from different fields. Without presenting myself as a jack-of-all-trades I refuse to pin myself down to any one field, I take-on studio-based work, and location work for advertising and editorial commissions because I enjoy the variety and the challenge. If I approach an advertising agency with a portfolio full of toothpaste tubes and industrial lubricants, I'll not get far - my selection is too narrow and I'd paint myself into a corner. Similarly, if I'm called to present my book to a publisher looking for full-face portrait images for a book cover, another approach entirely is called-for.

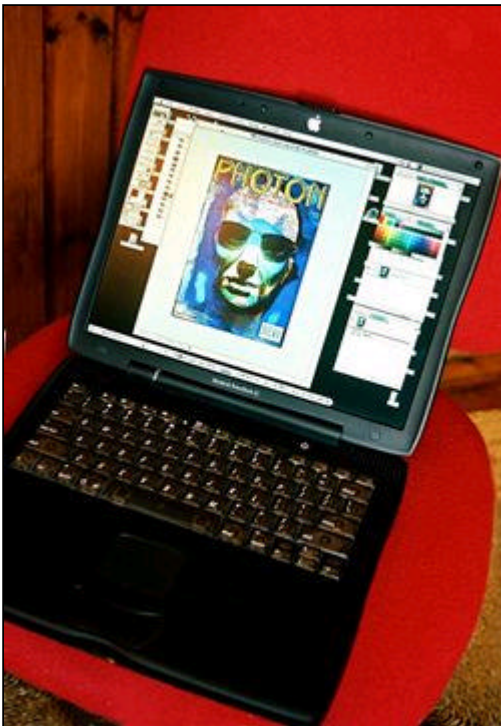
The portfolio is a fluid thing. It should be re-jigged and re-juvinated and changed to reflect the different requirements of commercial commissioners. Having several portfolios allows you to critically examine the different areas of your work and make a customised presentation as and when required.

Should I mix personal work with published commercial work?

Always. Photographers are hired for HOW they see things, not WHAT they see. Similarly, HOW you present yourself is just as important as WHAT you show. Photographers should always be taking pictures for themselves. It's what lights our candle in the first place. Some lucky (and talented) photographers claim to get top commissions by refusing to compromise and show only those images which show their own personal work. The rest of us need to present a book which will show evidence of commercial success that is 'out there' and published, alongside our own images which may demonstrate more of what we are capable of doing as opposed to examples of what we have been asked to do. The distinction is important. Personal work can show a passion and style often missing in tightly scripted commercial images. It's a difficult balance to get right - too much personal work in a commercial portfolio says 'I went to art school' not 'I'm the right man for this job'.



Well-presented promotional items like flyers, or folders of samples are crucial to your chances of success.



Laptops can be cumbersome and difficult to view under certain conditions. These are best kept as a back-up. With digital files created for all of my most important images, I use mine to help organise my various portfolios with different folders assigned to each subject or style.

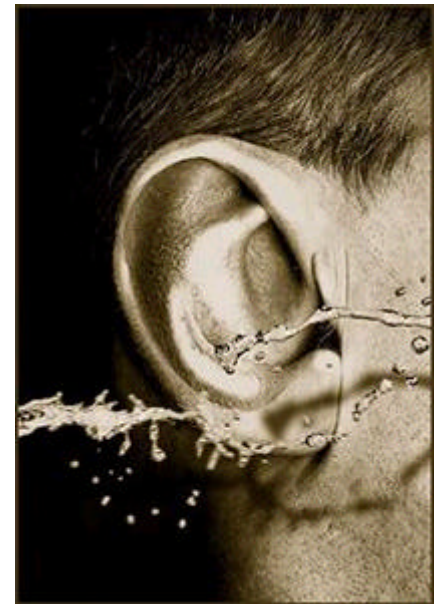
For most photographers, commercial successes are put into the portfolio as 'tear sheets' where a copy of the actual magazine spread, advertisement or whatever, proves its use commercially. The only danger of using too many tear sheets is that clients might actually be noticing the typefaces used, the page layout, or be distracted by the graphics used - this can detract from the images themselves. If your images are featured small amongst lots of typed columns of text, your book can take on the feel of a scrap book.

What about portfolios on CD, or presentations on laptops?

This is only useful as a portfolio presentation backup. If your potential client suddenly and unexpectedly signals the wish to see further examples of a particular area of your work which doesn't feature in your carefully selected dozen (and if time allows), bring in the laptop and show a digital file if you have created one. I sometimes prepare mini slide shows or 'videos' of my work using a programme called LiveSlideShow which can show useful 'emergency' portfolios if extra images are being requested or if you have an unexpected request for something which you know could clinch the deal.

Art buyers/directors will not look favourably on a laptop portfolio presentation as the only means of showing your wares. Screen callibrations and resolutions can vary, and true colours can go up the spout leaving a false impression of your original photographs - its a bit like taking a bunch of colour photocopies into a meeting and expecting them to convey the quality of your work.

CD's however can be a useful 'leave behind' for potential clients to look through at their leisure. Their size and weight make them useful space-savers but unless they have a striking cover, could well get buried and forgotten under paperwork and all the clutter of a busy office.



Art buyers are often on the look-out for photographers with 'interpretive skills' who can respond creatively to a concept or theme.

How should I conduct the meeting?

During your meeting, the following etiquette should be observed:-



I customise my CDs and zip discs with images from my portfolio. These can be quickly and cheaply produced on an ordinary desktop printer.

Allow the viewer the courtesy of looking at your work at his/her own pace, but pay careful attention to the time they take over individual images. Over time, and many other meetings, if an image gets scarcely a glance, think about removing or replacing it. If an image turns out to be a talking point with many people, think about moving it to the front of the book as an opening 'stunner' or an ice-breaker.

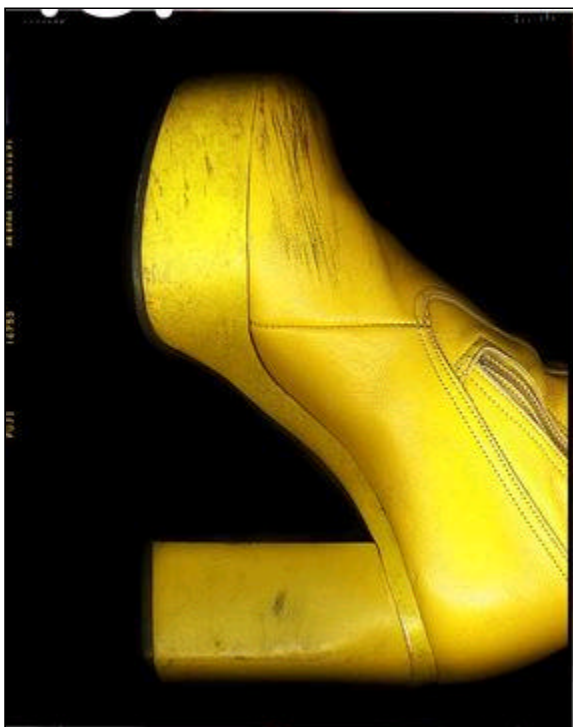
Don't waste time on small talk or provide a commentary. Allow your viewer to focus entirely on your images, not a background of babble and banter.

Take criticism on the chin and don't react defensively. You deserve an honest appraisal from them - many art buyers live, sleep, eat and drink images day-in and day-out, so their opinion of your work is valuable to you.

To conclude your meeting, always attempt to get some feedback from even the most tight-lipped viewer. Do they have any specific projects lined-up that you could be considered for? Do they know of any other professional colleagues (perhaps in similar roles with different companies) who would be interested in seeing your work? Contacts and personal recommendations are further useful links in the chain between your endeavours and your income.

A good 'leave behind' is essential as it ensures that a bit of you still remains even when the person has left and the memory fades. In recent times I have moved from attractively-bound laser copies in an A4 folder, to CDs since these seem to be becoming the medium of choice for many people. I still think that a lot of people prefer something on paper. Like a magazine compared to a web page, its immediate and tangible.

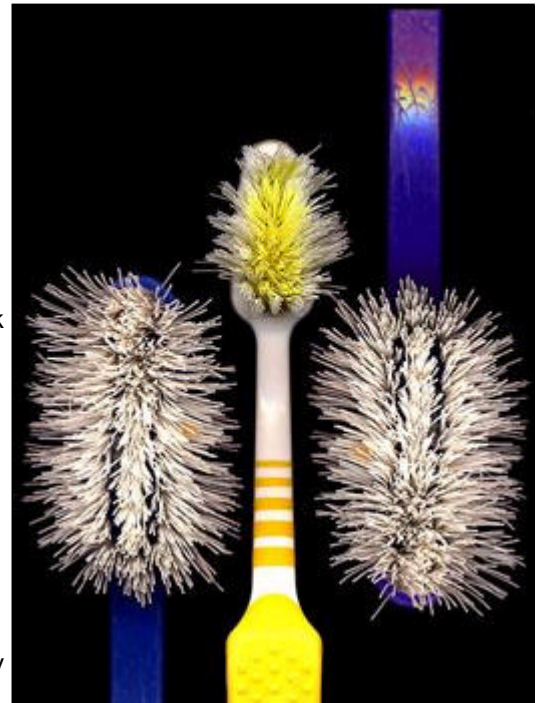
The giving of a business card, promotional postcard or similar will also reinforce your status and worth as a photographer, and this gesture will often require the art buyer to offer theirs in return - in which case, you have a green light to contact them again.



Further contact should be made as a matter of course in any case, usually between 3 - 7 days after your meeting, thanking them for their time and looking forward to hearing from them again. With some clients (to whom you have a particularly positive vibe) it may be worth your while offering to send them copies of recent commissions or fresh work in a month or so. It can be hard work maintaining and developing these relationships, but you are investing in your future by doing so.

Above all, the portfolio should be thought of as a process, constantly in flux and able to adapt and change. In effect, it should mirror the approach of a photographer who is not afraid to be bold, to try new things, adopt new approaches and methods. In short, remaining open-minded will in time bring its rewards. Forget your spouse or your dog - For the photographer, your portfolio is really your best friend.

Another image from my Personal Work section which (probably due to its direct simplicity) has been well-received so far and has even been sold as a signed print to one particular client. Yet another good reason for including personal work in your portfolio!



Not a commissioned image but an example of one of my personal still life studies which I show on occasions.