

Online Portfolios

Create a successful virtual showroom

by Marcia Passos Duffy

A picture is worth a thousand words, and great online pictures that display your finest work can add thousands to your bottom line.

The road to creating an exceptional online portfolio, however, has many hazards, and a poorly designed online portfolio can make your business look unprofessional, and can cost you clients if they click away from your site in frustration.

The elements

An online portfolio is today's sell sheet, says Chris Cipriano, an award-winning landscape designer and president and CEO of Cipriano Landscape Design in New Jersey (see his online portfolio at www.plantnj.com).

Cipriano's online sell sheet, or virtual showroom, includes selected landscape and hardscape projects that have won awards, before and after photos, masonry projects, water features, gardens, garden structures and construction. "The important element of every online portfolio is to showcase your best work," says Cipriano. Don't include every job you've ever done. Instead, break down the portfolio into the best projects you've done and that display your range of talent and design strengths.



While your best projects should be front and center, don't just include the most expensive and elaborate projects in your portfolio, particularly if you are not only after high-end jobs. Show a range of styles and projects that potential clients can relate to.

"Take time to think about the portfolio from [your potential customer's] perspective," said Barry Harrison, managing partner for San Francisco-based Resolve Digital (www.resolvedigital.com), a Web site design company that has created several Web sites for landscape designers.

Quality photos

You want high-quality photos of your work in your portfolio. If you are a good photographer, and know how to frame a photo and capture the details of your work, you can take the shots yourself. If you do, make sure that the landscape is not sterile looking and has a lived-in feel. Pool and outdoor furniture positioned in the photographs helps, as well as making sure the property is lush and green.

Another option is to hire a professional photographer, particularly a landscape photographer, who will know how to present your work in its best light.

"A portfolio of unprofessional and downright bad images always gives the impression that if this landscaper cares so little about his or her portfolio, how are they going to care about my project?" says Louis Foster, principal at Atlanta Architectural Photographers in Atlanta, Ga. "One good project resulting from the excitement of viewing a fabulous portfolio can pay for the cost of preparing it multifold," says Foster.

Before and after photos are useful, and the quickest way to convey to the visitor what you do, but there is no need to fill in with

Portfolio Pitfalls

Even if you carefully design your portfolio, there are common mistakes you need to avoid:

1. Forget flash introductions or loud music. There's no need for these presentations. Get right to the point, because today's Web user will not have the patience to sit through these introductions.
2. Don't make navigation difficult. Don't make the visitor jump through hoops to get to the portfolio. If they can't find it in one click, they will probably leave.
3. Don't keep visitors guessing. Don't assume visitors know what a project is about. State in the photo caption what the project is: a "waterscape" a "patio," etc. "When you show your portfolio to a prospective client, do you sit in silence as they flip through it?" asks Harrison. "Of course not; you describe, you explain, you sell."
4. Do add your credentials. Put a photo of yourself and your team and a short resume or biography. This is the place to put your awards, certifications, etc.
5. Don't forget social media. Have a YouTube video about a project? Do you have followers on Twitter? Have a fan base on FaceBook? Add those links to your contact page.

Online Portfolios

Continued from page 14

photos of every minute of the project; instead, let the customers' imagination fill in what happened in between.

"Too many pictures can be overwhelming and make everything seem harder than it needs to be for the customer," says Nathan Casey, president of Jobvana.com, a social marketplace for service providers and small businesses to market their services on the Web.

Words count

Not only can photographs make or break a portfolio, but words are also important. Don't keep the visitor guessing about what is in the photograph. Make sure you add detailed explanations about each project in the portfolio. The content could include the challenges the company faced in designing the landscape, the specifications of the client and how the challenges were met to satisfy the needs of the client.

But, don't feel compelled to write a history of the entire project. Give the visitor a sample of what you can do.

"The goal of your portfolio should be to start a 'conversation' with a customer, and to get a phone call," said Casey.

Client testimonials can also be great content to add to a portfolio. While video testimonials provide a bigger impact, that may not be in your budget.

Technical details

On the technical side, make sure you, or your Web designer, make the portfolio search engine-friendly, suggests Josh Freedman of Web 1 Marketing (www.web1marketing.com), a Seattle, Wash.-based Web marketing company.

- Each photo or project in your portfolio should have its own unique Web page.
- Include captions or descriptions for each photo since search engines can't tell what's in pictures, but they love text.
- Use keywords that include your service area and the specific service being shown in the description/

caption. Example: "Seattle native plant landscaping."

- Use keywords in your image's alt tag, and caption text in your page's title tag. (Make sure your Web designer does this if you do not know what this means.)

- Optimize photos for the Web. When pulled directly from a digital camera, photos are very large and slow to upload (even for visitors on high-speed). Photos need to be resized.

The goal of an online portfolio

Even if you have gorgeous pictures, engaging content and the site is perfectly optimized for the Web, a portfolio will not help your sales if you don't have one more thing: a call to action.

"Your Web site should answer three questions: 'Where am I at? What can I do here? Why should I do it?'" says Aaron Guldburg, founder and CEO of Critical Exposure (www.criticalexposure.com), a Web design company based in Fishers, Ind.

Your portfolio should be enticing enough to make the visitor want to learn more. Make sure you provide contact information, and then push them to action: a phone call or e-mail for more information or a free consultation. Make it easy for the visitor to find all your contact information, including your name, physical address, e-mail and phone number.

Make it professional

Experts agree that the biggest portfolio mistake is having your portfolio quickly slapped together in an unprofessional manner because it is "just online." The real selling, you may think, will happen face to face. However, that can cost you business, says David Saraiva, project manager for Lifeline Design (www.LifelineDesign.ca), a Web design and software solutions company in southern Ontario, Can.

"Your online portfolio is essentially a virtual showroom of your business," says Saraiva. "You wouldn't invite potential customers to come visit a brick and mortar showroom that was in disarray, but that is essentially what you are doing when your online portfolio is not up to par," he says. **LHC**

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