

# businesssmarts

By Paul Moakley

# portfolios101



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**W**hen it comes to making your portfolio there are so many questions that burn students up. What pictures should go in it? What should it look like? Is there a simple format to make a great book? Unfortunately there are no simple rules. That's why *PDNedu* asked some leading photo industry pros: What makes an outstanding portfolio? Industry insiders **Jodi Peckman, Director of Photography for *Rolling Stone***; **Bev Don, director of Art Buying at Merkle Newman Harty & Partners**; and **Jody Potter and Maria Avitabile, Photographers Representatives of J-Group Photo Agency** all had advice and inspiration for students ready to break into the business.

**What work goes into a portfolio?** All the creatives we interviewed agreed on one thing, they demand to see **consistency**. "It's all about having a recognizable style," says Jody Potter. Bev Don says, "I want to see a vision I can get excited about and bring to my art director," and Jodi Peckman pleads, "Don't be all over the place."

Peckman says, "I don't like portfolios that present ten different styles." To avoid the problem she recommends not mixing work from different classes if they don't blend visually. For example, your photojournalism classwork may not mix with the style of your still-life class. Maria Avitabile recommends you "don't jam too much into one book." Separate the types of photography you do into different portfolios for different potential clients.

The bottom line: creatives want to see a style they can hire you for. They need to feel confident that you can deliver work that reflects what's in your book. Don says, "I don't care about seeing highly produced shots." All the pros we spoke to recommend you only **show what you're most proud of**. Don says, "Show the personal work if it's

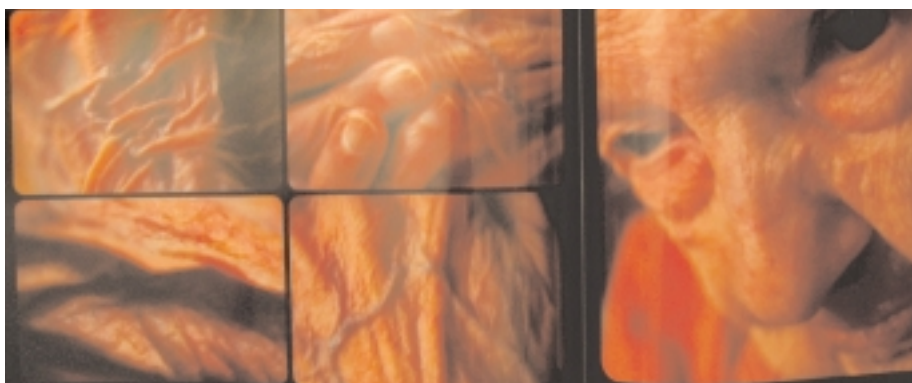


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Photos opposite page and left: Spreads from Josh Rothstein's portfolio show off the wide range of subjects he shoots. Jodi Peckman admires the unusual angles he chooses. Top right: Peckman also likes the clean and dramatic presentation of Matthew Rolston's book. Bottom right: J-Group Photo receives calls all the time asking how Meredith Heuer makes her compact handmade portfolios, perfect for her warm, intimate style.



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All portfolio shots by Meredith Marlay

the best. In the end it's the final images."

**Consider your audience.** Bev Don says, "You have to ask the question 'What kind of photography are you pursuing?' and place yourself in the seat of the buyer." Will you be dropping your book with magazines, ad agencies or galleries? Each one's usually looking for different styles. For instance, Peckman says, "[At *Rolling Stone*] we look at portrait books. I'm also looking at a lot of photojournalism." So send the work that's appropriate for the recipient.

**How many prints should be in your book?** All our experts say there is no set number but a common problem all our creatives pointed out is **repetition**. Jody Potter says "The biggest mistake students make is putting too much in there. I'd rather see 5 dynamite prints than 20 bad pictures." One pet peeve of everyone we spoke with is seeing



© Meredith Heuer



© Meredith Heuer



© Stephen Danielian

Above and below: Stephen Danielian's portfolio, another Jodi Peckman favorite.

images from one shoot sprinkled throughout the book. Be a harsh editor and show just the strongest one.

**What should the book look like?** Our creatives all agreed: simple is better. Potter says, "Portfolios should be manageable, like a laptop computer." Don't make the book too heavy or difficult to look through. Says Peckman, "I can't stand a book that weighs a ton in one of those gigantic metal cases. It's off-putting to me." Also consider the design of the book. Don says, "When I see something made of wood or wrapped up in gold ribbons, my first impression is this better be good because you presented yourself in a kind of pretentious way." If you're not into making the book yourself, look online for a quality portfolio at a place like House of Portfolios [www.houseofportfolios.com](http://www.houseofportfolios.com).

Make sure the book is in good shape and not beat up. The agents on our panel couldn't stress this point enough. Avitabile insists, "The book should be pristine, like wearing your Sunday best." Clean greasy fingerprints from the pages and replace scratched and torn photos.

**What type of prints should you have?** Should I show C-prints. Digital prints? Should they have a frame or be full bleed? All our creatives feel these are very personal decisions for a photographer—"It doesn't matter as long as it looks good," says Peckman—but they did give some suggestions. Regarding digital prints Don

says, "They're great as long as they are not super saturated and fluorescent." Potter says, "They just have to be calibrated well and be a good print bottom line." On print size Avitabile says, "Don't go bigger than 11 x 14." When it comes to full bleeds or borders, that too is a personal choice. Our advice to photographers is to be consistent throughout the book, and to find a style that works for you. You don't want to distract with your presentation. You want to enhance the recipient's experience of viewing your photos.

**How many books you should make?** If you're right out of school, make two: one to send out for requests; and one to bring on appointments. Unfortunately, after all the work you put into making a book, most creatives expect to see **your Web site**. They may even want to see it before you drop off. So if you're still in school, consider squeezing in a Web design class or making friends with a designer. The advice for your portfolio applies to your site. Make it easy to use and don't show too much. Your site should reflect your portfolio, and you'll find that it's a powerful tool in promoting your work. Don and the agents from J-Group claim that these days the majority of portfolios they see are online. But don't think you can replace an actual portfolio with a virtual one. Don says, "As long as we work on print campaigns, we will need to see printed books."

**When we asked our creatives if they look at student portfolios**, all of them said, "YES!" Peckman: "There's no way of knowing if it's a student's." Don may have given us the best news of all: "The news today about being a student is a



## HELPFUL HINTS FOR DROPPING YOUR BOOK OFF:

**First call a magazine or ad agency for their drop of policy.** You usually can get this information from the main number. Most magazines will have a set schedule. For example, *Rolling Stone's* drop-off day is every Wednesday, with pick-ups Thursday. Some ad agencies will even have big portfolio drop-off events, so call and check.

**Include a leave-behind in your portfolio, with your phone number on it.** It doesn't have to be an expensive postcard. Color photocopies or small prints work just fine.

**Make sure your name is on your book, and appears prominently on the outside of you book and on your bag.**

**A week or two before you send your book, send a picture/promo/letter/postcard to the person you've targeted.** Make sure you use a photo from your book.

**Don't send mass e-mails.** It's impersonal and doesn't get anyone's attention.

**If you're going to send email promos make sure they open easily.** Test them out on your friends' Macs and PCs.

**Remember who you've met with by keeping a log of all your appointments and drop offs.** One of the most irksome things you can do is to reintroduce yourself to someone you've already seen.

**Also don't forget to send a thank you note** if you want to leave a great, lasting impression.