

Crafting Your UX Portfolio:

The Best Approach to Get Hired Today

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October 27, 2017

With the continued growth and evolution of the user experience (UX) field, more and more professionals are publishing UX portfolios online. There remains a lot of variation in the portfolios of professionals as the field is still relatively young. While this is true, there are three clear strategies when approaching a UX portfolio. The biggest and most underused strategy is case studies to present previous projects. By making a shift to using case studies, any UX professional will be able to illustrate their individual ideas, processes, and problem solving abilities better than before to potential employers and clients.

Problem: What makes a good UX portfolio?

Portfolios are not going away anytime soon, given their relative importance in helping show the skills and creative talents that each individual has. They show a side of user experience experts that a resume will never be able to. Due to this, it will be ever important to create a successful portfolio that can showcase both individual personality and creative solutions to projects.

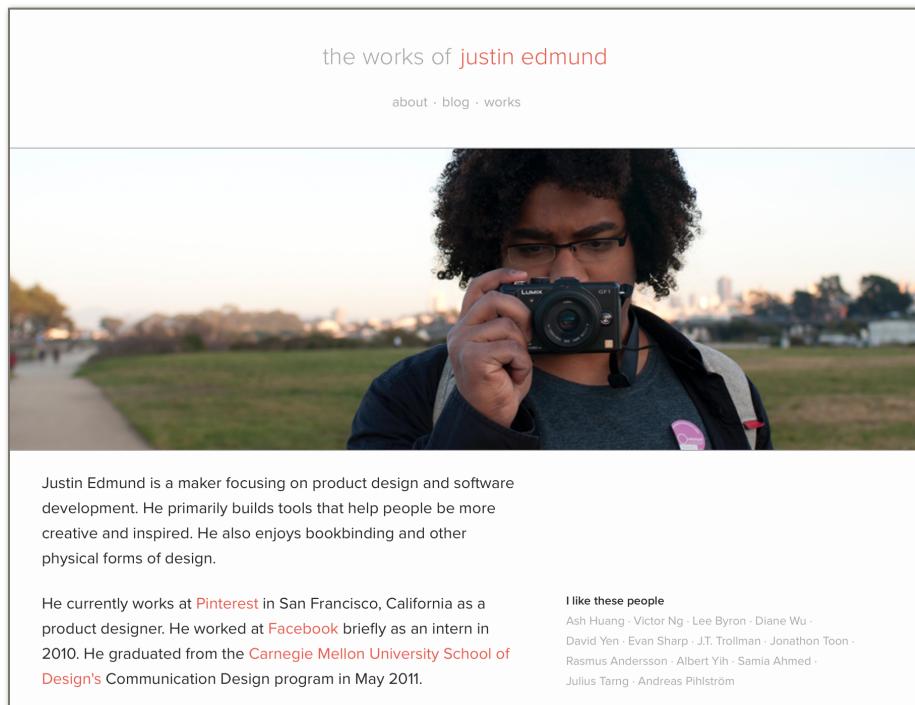
Having a portfolio is just as important a piece to any career and job hunting as a resume is, if not more important now. While for many fields portfolios are generally easy to come up with, but for those involved with user experience things are a little more up in the air. Everybody tries to do something unique and different in an attempt to show off their skills, but overall there is no standard for what makes a basic portfolio. The problem here is that professionals looking to create a UX portfolio have no basic guide to follow on what items to include and how to include them.

My Solution

In an attempt to solve this issue, this white paper sets out to give some guidelines to follow and some tips to create the best portfolio to win over hiring teams. Generally, employers want to see what kinds of work you have done and how you moved from start to finish, but there are a variety of different things that need to be included, especially early on in a career.

What should you include?

Outside of just project work, a good portfolio will also include a couple of standard pieces as well. These are extremely common across personal websites, though the approach at incorporating these items is up to the individual. The main ones are a personal biography, an updated resume, and contact information.



The screenshot shows the 'about' page of Justin Edmund's portfolio. At the top, it says 'the works of [justin edmund](#)' with links for 'about · blog · works'. Below is a large photo of Justin Edmund, a man with dark curly hair and glasses, holding a camera up to his eye. A caption below the photo reads: 'Justin Edmund is a maker focusing on product design and software development. He primarily builds tools that help people be more creative and inspired. He also enjoys bookbinding and other physical forms of design.' Another section below states: 'He currently works at [Pinterest](#) in San Francisco, California as a product designer. He worked at [Facebook](#) briefly as an intern in 2010. He graduated from the [Carnegie Mellon University School of Design](#)'s Communication Design program in May 2011.' On the right, there's a sidebar titled 'I like these people' with a list of names: Ash Huang, Victor Ng, Lee Byron, Diane Wu, David Yen, Evan Sharp, JT. Trollman, Jonathon Toon, Rasmus Andersson, Albert Yih, Samia Ahmed, Julius Tarno, and Andreas Phlstrom.

**FIGURE 1: ABOUT PAGE OF JUSTIN EDMUND'S PORTFOLIO.
(SOURCE: JEDMUND.COM/ABOUT)**

First there is the personal biography or “About Me.” Most people include a short one to two paragraph bio, typically on their homepage, showing off their personality as well as both professional and personal interests and hobbies. One successful example of this method is the biography of Justin Edmund (Figure 1). He uses a very minimalistic approach, incorporating a large image of himself as a header on the page with two short paragraphs of background information.

While this is the most common approach, it is not simply the only approach. Some people, like Adham Dannaway and Simon Pan (Figure 2), want to inject more of their personal life into their biography. Simon shows off the some of the media he is currently consuming, while Adham includes random facts about himself. Each of these examples incorporate interests and hobbies, rather than strictly sticking to work, education, and the like.

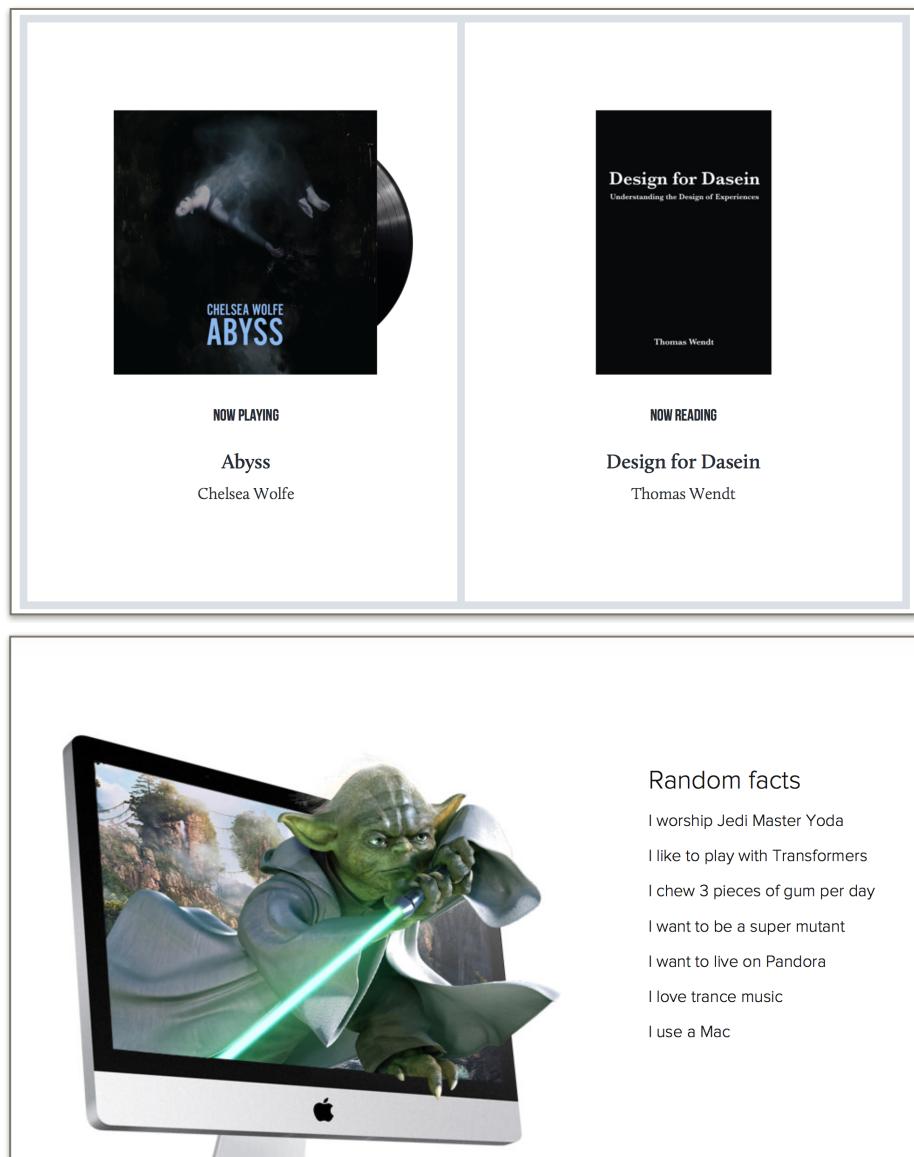


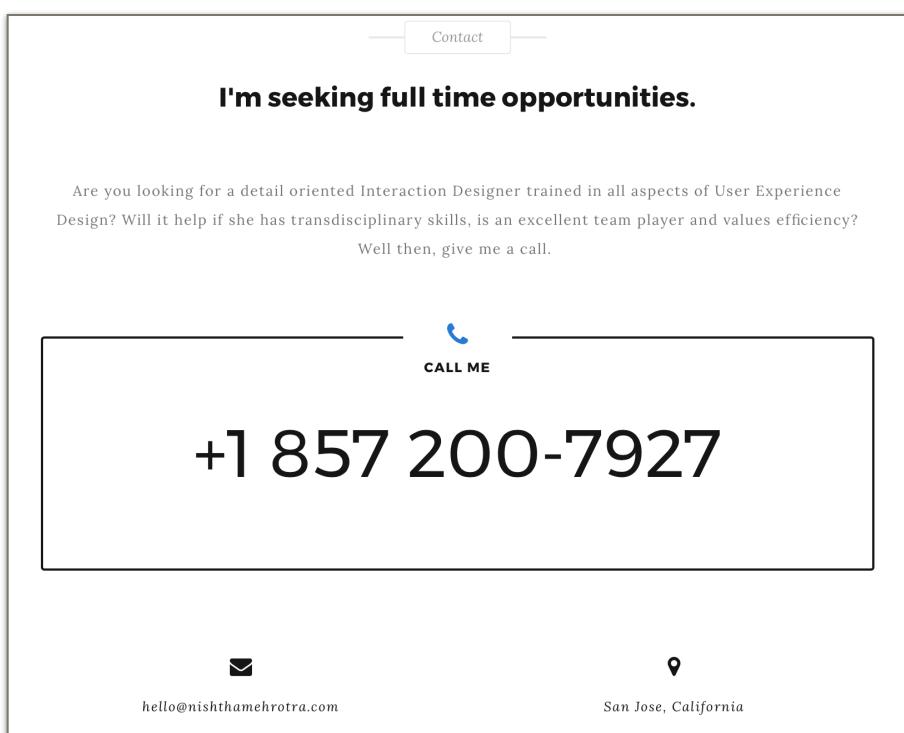
FIGURE 2: SIMON PAN (TOP) LISTS WHAT HE IS CURRENTLY CONSUMING, WHILE ADHAM DANNAWAY GIVES SOME RANDOM FACTS ABOUT HIMSELF. (SOURCES: SIMONPAN.COM/ABOUT AND ADHAMDANNAWAY.COM/ABOUT)

The next standard to include is your resume. Adding your resume to a personal website is relatively straightforward. In general, it is best to include the same content that exists on both your print resume as is on your website. The only difference is that your print resume can include more information, such as a longer work history, than your online one. By keeping the

online resume shorter, this makes the page easier to quickly read and when somebody wants to read more they can quickly jump to your print resume to find that information. Building off that, it is important to include a link to a PDF copy of your full resume online as well. In general, include your resume and a PDF version to print on your website, style them consistently, keep them updated, and try to have them match the overall design you have for your portfolio.

It is also vitally important to include contact information on your personal website as well. While these are very simple concepts, there are a wide variety of ways to execute them. One common one is to add in an email form. Using an email form eliminates the friction that comes in when just providing your email address on your website, as users don't need to open another application to contact you. Doing this also eases any privacy concerns, as your contact information is not directly listed and available.

While email remains an extremely popular form of communication online, it is far from the only way to get in touch with someone. When preparing your contact information, it is important to consider how you personally want to be contacted. For example, Nishtha Mehrotra (Figure 3) highlights her phone number first within her contact information.



By placing emphasis like this, she tells the visitors of her portfolio that she would prefer phone calls to emails. Some people will do similar things for other platforms, like Twitter Direct Messages or LinkedIn messages. Lastly, be sure to include links to any social media platforms you would like potential clients, managers, and bosses to be able to view. Be sure these accounts are kept professional and are updated and posted to frequently.

There are a variety of other sections you can include as well. Some people host blogs alongside their portfolio, while

**FIGURE 3: CONTACT PAGE OF NISHTHA MEHROTRA'S WEBSITE.
(SOURCE: NISHTHAMEHROTRA.COM/#CONTACT)**

others use this space to promote published articles and recording of talks they have given at conferences and other events. Other things people include are details about the tools and services they use, design philosophies, and professional interests.

Case Studies

Finally, there is the actually project portfolio itself. This is where the most questions come up, especially as to how these should be formatted and styled, as well as how to write them. While many people will just list projects, this doesn't help show and explain to potential employers the thought processes, revisions, and problem solving that went into final solutions. While in some instances just listing a project and it's final products works (for example, a paper like this), in most design and development projects it is better to write a case study.

What is a case study?

Before jumping into writing case studies, it is important to understand what they are and why they should be used. Case studies are in-depth reviews of projects. They walk readers through the process involved in the project from beginning to end. Projects "always start and end ... with a goal and an outcome" and this should be the emphasis of any case study (Baker). They should showcase the task at hand and push through to the outcomes for the project owner.

Case studies also let you show work that has problems. While a simple UX portfolio would only include finished projects, using case studies gives you the ability to talk about a project that might have failed. By including failed projects, you show that you have the courage to show that you can be critical of your work too. Failed project case studies let you discuss highs and lows, the things you learned, and the things you would do differently. While this might not work for everyone, keeping these concepts in mind can leave an impression on interviewers as well as those who look through your portfolio.

In general, case studies are longform ways of demonstrating your ability to collaborate and work with others. They show off your character, problem solving skills, and ability to work with stakeholders, and under constraints and deadlines.

What types of work should you include?

There are a couple rules to follow when deciding what types of work to include. First and foremost, include recent projects that showcases your best work. This works in most general cases, but there is a situation where this will not apply. Don't follow this rule when you are looking for a job with a particular work focus. For example, if you have done primarily web design but you want to find a job doing mobile application design, then you should highlight your mobile design work first. If you have enough, you could potentially only feature mobile

design. By doing this, you emphasize the work you do in that field, rather than showing a mismatch of work that could land you a project offer you don't really want.

The next thing to remember is that every project you include does not need to be for a client. Especially during the college and early post-college years, you may not have a lot of work to showcase for clients. In this situation, you can include designs and redesigns that you have done either as pet projects or class projects.

Speaking of class projects, do not just dump every single design, research, or prototyping project you have done on your portfolio. Many people will suggest this, but there is a key flaw in the thought process of that suggestion. This issue with including class projects is that they show the ability to follow a prompt. If everybody in a given class included the same project on their portfolio, then it does not really show any problem solving skills, as everything was outlined for you. Unfortunately, this does not emulate what the real world is like. But this isn't to say including class projects is a bad thing. It is just important to include your best work in a case study to show your problem solving skills and your thought process on the project.

Finally, some last quick tips on projects to include. If you have physical product designs, include them in the real-world, or at least in mock-ups in the real world scenarios. Also, you can include projects that remain under a non-disclosure agreement by working with the project owner to establish what is and is not acceptable based on the NDA you signed. And lastly, don't include projects that all look different or could possibly look like the work of different designers. Keep the work you feature current and keep your project portfolio updated.

How do you craft a good case study?

A good case study features three main parts. One of these is much longer than others, but they are all essentials for an in-depth case study.

First, you need to establish some context and state the problem. By including the background for the project, readers can set themselves up for following your process. You can discuss the client's goals and the intended outcomes for the project. One thing to consider including is the process behind establishing outcomes. While some clients come in to projects with this outlined, others need some help or have too many to make a viable product. If you worked with a client to help establish and identify the necessary outcomes to consider the project a success, add this process to the opening section of your case study. This is generally one of the shorter sections of a case study.

Next, you will want to show off your research and problem solving process. Walk through each phase of the project and each step from beginning to end. In this section you want to include as many images as you can of process work from the project. This includes wireframes, prototypes, mock-ups, and scrapped visuals. Depending on the services used on the project, you can potentially include working prototypes of various elements.

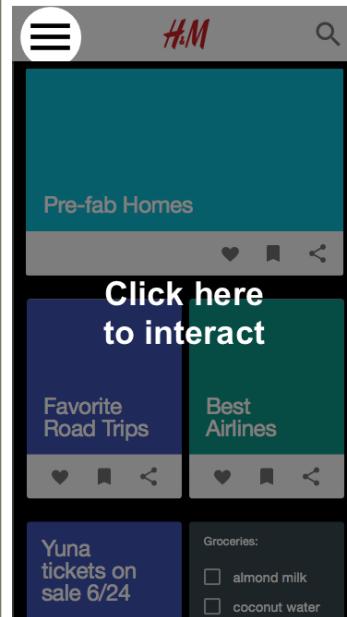
An excellent example of this is found in Alan Shen's work for H&M (Figure 4). On one part of the project there was some experimentation on different types of category interaction. Rather than just talking about them or showing static images, he encourages readers to try these different methods out themselves. But you cannot just include a bunch of unrelated prototypes; you still need to include the context and explain the why behind these prototypes and what happened as a result of these experiments.

When you write about the process, it is not enough to simply include a gallery of images. While it is easy to talk about what happened, it is not easy to know what you will need to talk about. This is because it will change from project to project. For instance, one project may require a lot of discussion about picking platforms, like if you are choosing a CMS, while another may require more discussion about design language and the iterative process that went into establishing a theme for the service or product.

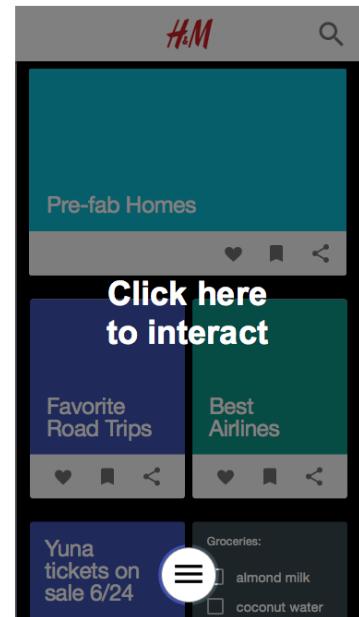
EXPLORATIONS IN UI

As a fashion brand, the expectation was that a digital product by H&M would be as fresh as the latest fashion trends. We did a lot of discovery into the mobile realm, trying to discern between up-and-coming UI patterns and experimental fads. Eventually we translated our discovery into an exercise in prototyping various mobile navigation methods; below you'll find some of our explorations into just the navigation:

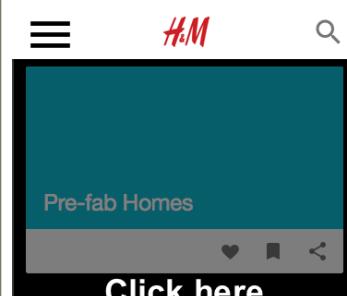
v2: X-Y Offset



v3: Bottom Expand



v5: Context Shift



v6: Bottom Half Tray

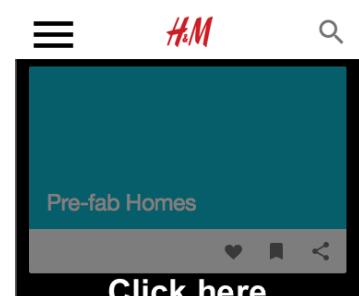


FIGURE 4: ALAN SHEN INCLUDES CLICKABLE PROTOTYPES FROM A PROJECT FOR H&M. (SOURCE: ALANMSHEN.COM/2016/04/03/HM-TESTING-A-SOCIAL-NETWORK/)

By explaining all of this, you give potential employers and clients a chance to see what they can expect from you and your problem-solving abilities. If you had daily meetings with a client trying to pick a design, talk about that because it shows your collaborative process, for example. Also, explaining yourself is something actually useful. Just including flashy visuals because you created them at some point is less useful because they do not serve an use towards the outcome of your case study. A short side note about visuals—be sure to caption any images or directly reference them in writing to explain what is going on.

The best advice here is to know what is important from the project, what happened along the project timeline that you can write how the project advanced toward the final product. Include what is necessary to understand the project, but do not drag on too much or get held up on one part.

Finally, do not forget to talk about the results of the project. When writing this part, consider the question “How did my work impact the business?” If you can, include metrics like traffic and conversion rate rather than buzzwords. Attempt to get the data directly from the project owner. This closing section needs to talk about how your results achieve the outcomes you discussed in the opening section. When data is not possible, or is not related to the intended outcomes, then try to interview stakeholders or users to see if your final work achieves its outcomes and have some quotes to reference in your case study.

An Extended Example

To get a better look at and understanding of case studies, it is important walk through a well thought out example. We will be

Interview notes.

I interviewed 10 participants, and the key takeaways were:

- Locals don't necessarily understand a city better than tourists. Often tourists will do research before they get to a city, and have a good mental model of it.
- People usually use a combination of transportation methods, and have one or two they don't like. The one that they don't like differs.
- One big unsolved challenge for navigation is figuring out the side of street.
- Almost everybody relies heavily on Google Maps.
- Many factors affect the transportation people choose:
 - Time of day — cars and cabs are more popular at night
 - Existence of others — whether or not splitting a cab is efficient, whether or not everyone has cash, the age of some members
 - Cost — monthly passes, cheapest options
 - Current location and proximity to major stations
 - Weather and time
 - Intent to exercise
 - Having to change methods of transportation
 - Reliability of data / availability of real-time data

Navigation apps

Informal competitive analysis led to discovering that there are a lot of existing options for navigation, many of which fill the gaps that Google Maps doesn't fill. Combined with the interview research, I realized that there was little use in creating yet another app for navigation, especially when people tended to stick to Google

FIGURE 5A: INTERVIEW NOTES AND RESEARCH RESULTS FROM XIE'S WORK ON SIDETRACK.

looking at work from Zhuoshi Xie on Sidetrack, an app for world exploration and discovery. (The full case study is available here: design.helloxie.com/sidetrack/) An important note is that not everybody has the same thought process, so take this as an example only, not something to directly copy from.

Xie leads with a minimal amount of background, but gives enough between the short introduction and the video prototype. While there isn't a lot of information here, continuing down the study provides more information. Next, there are two sections on her research. She goes in-depth on the information she gleaned from her sources and provides samples of both her interview notes and brainstorm documents (Figure 5A).

She then leads into defining what the app is. Walking through her assumptions about the user of this application, she includes both rough wireframe as well as an interface flow tree. Something very unique to this case study, as a part of this defining phase, she discusses possible exploration interests and the survey she used to generate her list of interests to include (Figure 5B). Including this shows the processes she used in the creation of this app. By

Exploration interests

Different people are drawn to different things when exploring. In order to build personalized routes where the user is likely to find something they like, there is a settings section on the app where they indicate their exploration interests. While asking users to self-identify interests may not be the most accurate way to gather this information, it's the most efficient way to do so, and the options can match with the data that the system has. In addition, personalized interests would not be the only factor in producing routes; aggregate user data would also be considered.

I sent a survey to find out what people might be interested in, and formed this list based on their responses.

General	Cityscape	People	Nature	Food	Visuals
Houses/Residences Abandoned Areas Construction Areas Animals Sports	Signage Lights/Lighting Architecture Buildings	Crowds People Watching Areas Unique People	Wildlife Woods Flowers Parks	Restaurants Cafes Bakeries Fast Foods Tea and Coffee	Colors Graffiti Nooks Quiet Areas Hideaways
	Stores Retail Local Businesses	Sites Historical Sites Tourist Attractions Museums	Events Concerts		

FIGURE 5B: XIE INCLUDES THIS LIST OF INTERESTS SHE GENERATED THROUGH USER SURVEYS.




PZ had free time and just wanted to quickly explore her surroundings. I gave her a route that took her to unfrequented areas next to campus. Notes about her trip:

- It wasn't clear which was starting and which was ending on the route map
- She completely ignored the route summary
- She followed the general direction of the route at first, but completely just let her interests take her, which took up the rest of the time
- She was constantly trying to connect what she was seeing with what she's seen in pictures
- She expressed enjoyment, that it felt like off campus
- She said she was afraid of trespassing, but completely ignored a trespassing sign elsewhere

Continuing work

- More research on how people might use this app, and how the interface should change based on their behaviors
- Onboarding, to introduce the user to the app and to set up preliminary settings like city and interests
- Sharing a generated route
- Planning routes ahead of time
- Taking advantage of different screen sizes

FIGURE 5C: TO CLOSE THIS CASE STUDY, XIE TALKS ABOUT THE NEXT STEPS AS THIS PROJECT PROGRESSES IN THE FUTURE.

explaining how she generated the list of interests, she eliminates assumptions about her process. If she chose not to mention the survey it is possible to assume she made the list herself, rather than considering what users wanted.

Finally, she discusses the user research she has done up to this point, including images of her participants partaking in the tests and the results she found (Figure 5C). Since this is an independent and ongoing project, Xie doesn't have results, rather she has continuing goals and tasks.

Creating your portfolio

When you are ready to build your portfolio, it is important to create something that represents your individual style yet can showcase your skills. Before you can start designing, you need to determine how you want to host your portfolio. The three biggest options are design sharing websites, WYSIWYG websites, and hand-coded websites.

Choosing a platform

With design sharing websites, such as Dribbble and Behance, the personal profile quickly showcases all of your work. This makes it easy upload assets and showcase projects and all their parts. Many people like to use Dribbble and it is easy to just share your profile link with others. Some people, like Javier Ghaemi, have a personal website, but his projects (Figure 6) all link to Behance posts with some additional details. A big advantage is that all you need to do is create the case studies to

showcase; there is no need to worry about how the website works because there is another staff doing that. On the other hand, in the event that whichever platform you choose ends up closing, then you may need to scramble to come up with another alternative.

Then you have WYSIWYG (what you see is what you get) websites, like WordPress, Weebly, or Squarespace. These sites have the personality of a

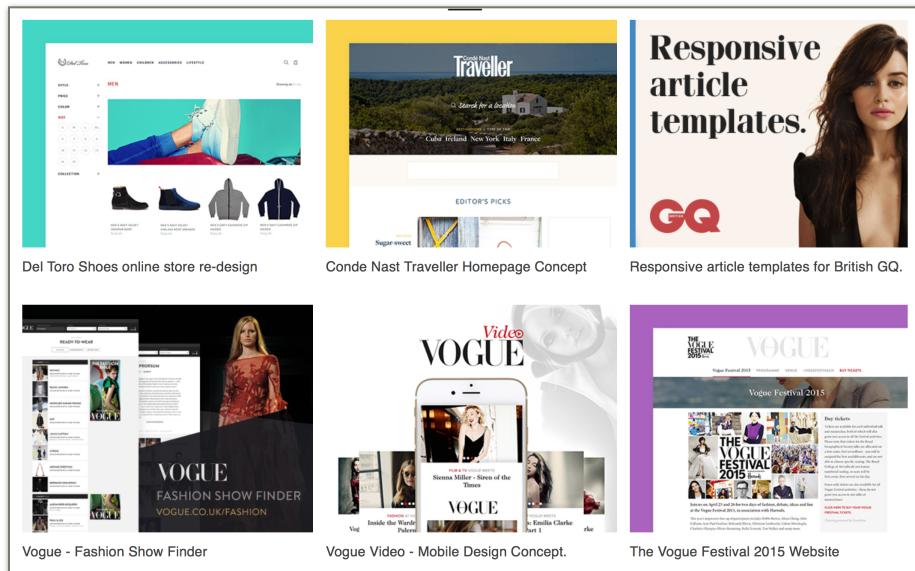


FIGURE 6: JAVIER GHAEMI USES THIS GRID ON HIS WEBSITE TO LINK TO HIS BEHANCE PROFILE. (SOURCE: [HTTP://WWW.JAVIERGHAEMI.CO.UK](http://WWW.JAVIERGHAEMI.CO.UK))

hand-coded website with the ease of using pre-built tools, themes, and resources. Taking this approach, individuality can shine through, but you are limited by what the service has available. WYSIWYG allows you to quickly get a website up and running and gives you some more organization than services like Dribbble.

Finally, there is the most original, yet most involved approach. This is the hand-built website. One of the best reasons to take this approach is that it automatically becomes a portfolio piece and you can turn the project into a case study of its own. While the extra work may not fit into busy work schedules, the outcome is usually worth the effort. By building and hosting your own website, you maintain full control over design and structure without limitation. This allows you to express full creativity and really create the type of experience you would like.

A hand-coded website is the best approach for any excellent UX portfolio. By using this method, anyone is able to express their individual design skills and meet the needs of both themselves and those who they believe will be looking at their portfolio without the structured limits of a design sharing platform or WYSIWYG editor, but that doesn't mean the others are bad options, especially if you are pressed for time to have a portfolio up online. Additionally, services like Dribbble and Squarespace are excellent starting points to have some amount of professional presence while working on a more permanent hand-coded website.

Designing your portfolio

This leads to my final point, designing your portfolio. While it might be easy to brush this off, there are many little things to consider when crafting the design and functionality of your portfolio website. The most important piece of advice comes from Eric Bieller. In his 2016 article, he reminds us that we must "treat creating your portfolio like any other design project you'd take on" (Bieller). Just as there are two sides to most user experience work, here too are two sides to consider when designing and building your portfolio.

First, design. It is important that UX portfolios try to follow current design trends. While it might not be important to constantly update the design of your portfolio, when building a version try to follow color and theme trends. When considering color, try not to be boring, but do not pick outrageous colors that don't match. A recommended approach to designing your portfolio is follow the same method you would on any other website. For example, if you would wireframe, prototype, and then build, do all those steps. Create possible color palettes and type cards for your website and don't skip steps just because you are your own client for this project.

Lastly, do not forget about mobile design. It can be an easy thing to ignore, but it can be a deal breaker, especially if you focus on responsive design. A great example of responsive design

comes from Erik Bue. His simple portfolio (Figure 7) features a list of projects with an emphasis on the linked text when viewing on a desktop browser. But when switching to a mobile view, the emphasis shifts to the images of his projects, creating large click targets on smartphones. Then there is also the experience and functionality to consider. While clean, modern design is important, even more so is the functionality. This can really be make or break when it comes to getting a job, because if your portfolio does not function as intended, that then reflects poorly on your skill set as an applicant.

Many people try to create new, innovative experiences, but these can hamper the experience for potential employers. While innovation in design and layout are really great to show off creativity, don't lose focus on the user and creating something that is simple to navigate both quickly and easily. A great example of clean, modern design comes from Rebecca Li. Her homepage (Figure 8A) uses a simple two-column layout with the left having a small profile and links to social media and the right featuring design philosophy and links to her case studies. Once you click into one of the links, there are some simple navigation on the top (Figure 8B), with back and next buttons to jump between case studies and a link in the

PROJECTS —

Chance the Rapper
Coloring Book —

I think it's safe to say that I had more fun listening to Coloring Book in 2016 than I did any other album. Admittedly, I'm not the biggest Chance fan, but I think he's brilliant. I think a lot of his appeal, for me, comes from the beautiful melancholy atmosphere that pulls the album together. It's like a mix of a blues album and a gospel album. Inversely, I often feel like I've stepped into the lens of a gospel church service. Even I was surprised how high Coloring Book ended up ranking, but I feel like it's constantly in a good mood while listening to this album, and I feel like Chance was probably pretty stoned when writing it.

SEE THE PROJECT
Same Drugs

My Favorite Albums: 2016

WEBSITE

PROJECTS —

Chance the Rapper
Coloring Book —

My Favorite Albums: 2016

WEBSITE

Facebook: Enterprise Design
HMM...

FIGURE 7: ERIC BUE HAS TWO DIFFERENT VIEWS THAT CHANGE WHICH PART GETS EMPHASIS. IMAGES ARE LARGER IN MOBILE VIEWS (TOP) WHILE THERE IS MORE SPACE IN DESKTOP BROWSERS. (SOURCE: ERIKBUE.COM)

middle to her home page. Finally, scrolling through any of her case studies or articles, she uses clean design with accent colors, and clear, obvious buttons.

Conclusion

So when it comes to building your UX portfolio, there seem to be three major keys to success. The first is to make sure you have the all the right parts in place. Have your portfolio established, your resume posted, and some way to contact you. The more pieces missing, the harder it is for someone to consider you for work and get in touch with you.

Second, make sure your portfolio is primarily built around case studies.

Using case studies allow you to illustrate your thought process and creative problem solving skills.

While having project work posted is important, being able to explain the process is important to establish yourself as a professional.

Finally, make sure you have a design that reflects your skills and current trends.

Make sure you have a portfolio that is up to current trends on color, layout, and design. Stay original and show off some personality, but don't create something so complex that it becomes too difficult to navigate. Remember, you are a UX professional, so your portfolio should meet the same standards you have for any other project.

Follow those guidelines, borrow ideas from the work of others and inject yourself into the work and you will have a portfolio that can help you get hired today.

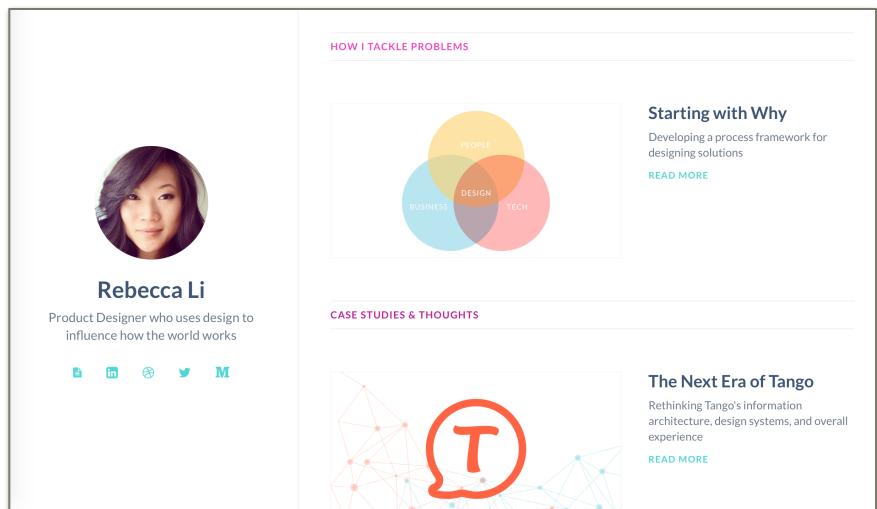


FIGURE 8A: REBECCA LI USES A SIMPLE TWO-COLUMN HOMEPAGE THAT IS EASY TO NAVIGATE (SOURCE: BECCA.LI/INDEX.HTML)

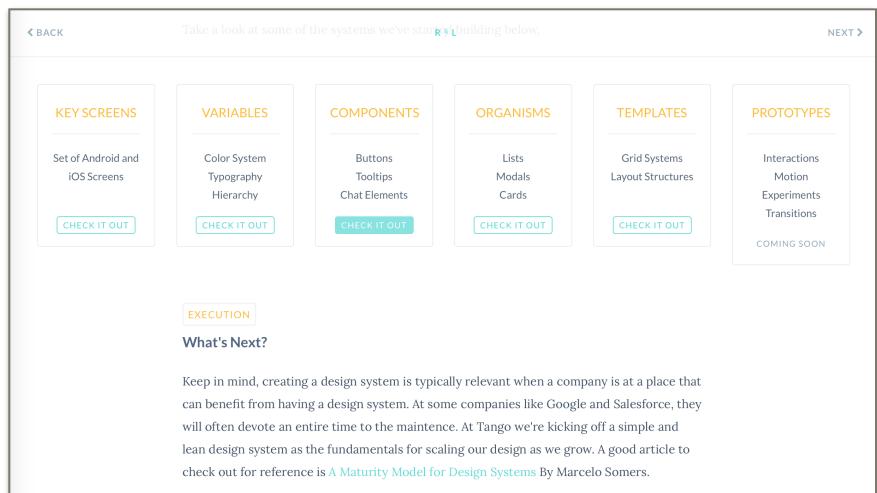


FIGURE 8B: HER CASE STUDIES FEATURE CONTRASTING ACCENT COLORS AND CLEAR, OBVIOUS BUTTONS. SHE ALSO HAS A SIMPLE NAVIGATION BAR AT THE TOP. (SOURCE: BECCA.LI/TANGONEW.HTML)

Appendix A: List of Portfolios Referenced

Bue, Erik - erikbue.com	Mehrotra, Nishtha - nishthamehrotra.com
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Dannaway, Adham - adhamdannaway.com	Shen, Alan - alanmshen.com
Edmund, Justin - jedmund.com	Szczepanski, Michael - harkmylord.com
Hess, Whitney - whitneyhess.com	Taylor, Luke James - lukejamestaylor.com
Kuzmic, Zach - zachkuzmic.com	Taylor, Joshua - joshuataylordesign.com
Lamm, Eva-Lotta - evalotta.net	Xie, Zhuoshi - design.helloxie.com
Li, Rebecca - becca.li	Yu, Edmund - edmundyu.com

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