

Model Portfolio

What are Portfolios and Composite Cards?

What is a Portfolio?

A portfolio is a visual "resume" and "catalog" of what the model can do. It is the most important tool a model has for interviewing and getting jobs. The model portfolio contains a series of photographs of the model as well as "tear sheets."

Tear sheets are pages from actual ads or articles where the model's photo was used. Tearsheets are extremely important because they show that the model has actually "worked" real jobs before.

A portfolio should generally contain shots which feature the model in the most positive way for the types of jobs he/she is trying to get. When it comes to portfolios, "you sell what you advertise."

In other words, if you're trying to get a job as a swimsuit model, your portfolio should feature several swimwear shots rather than a series of shots in mid-winter with you in Eskimo parkas.

Two Basic Shots - Headshot and Full-Length

The most basic shots that every model needs are a head-shot and a full-length shot.

For models, their most important feature is their face.

The face is 90% of what we find "beautiful" about a person, and the face also helps us critique personality and character of the person. A great looking headshot is essential for marketing the model.

Also, for most work, the client will need to see what the model's body looks like.

A full-length shot in a fitted dress, leotard, swimsuit, or lingerie will show the tone and figure of the model.

Remember that the full-length shot is to show the "outline" of your body, and you will completely defeat the purpose if you wear anything loose or baggy. (Actually loose clothing makes you appear much heavier -- and also makes it look like you are trying to hide your figure.)

Other Portfolio "Basics"

Additional portfolio shots often include some 3/4 length shots (head to hips) in a variety of clothing to show off looks from formal to casual.

If a model has particularly good hands, or feet, or legs, or back muscles, close-ups of those areas should also be included.

Also, it's important to show how the model can "interact" with products or other models. Therefore, having some photos which look like they came out of an "advertisement" is also important in creating a dynamic and well-rounded portfolio.

Wherever possible, you should include tear sheets in your portfolio. Tears hold more credibility with clients because they demonstrate that you have actual "job" experience.

A portfolio normally contains 15-30 photos and tears. However, the key is QUALITY -- not QUANTITY.

A portfolio with 5 great shots will always be better than a portfolio of 20 great shots and 20 mediocre ones. Careful editing of shots is important. As you gain experience and more photos & tears, use your best new shots to replace older shots in your book.

Never include a bad photo or tearsheet to "get your number" of pages up. Clients and photographers will always remember you by the worst image you have in your portfolio. Make that decision hard for them!

Clients and photographers alike really appreciate having models with "current" books (it does a client little good to see a bunch of photos of someone with hair to their waist when you arrive with a crew-cut). So even if the shots are really great -- if they don't match your current looks -- you'll have to eliminate many of them.

Make it Memorable

Always remember that you are competing with sometimes thousands of other models for the same limited number of jobs. For that reason, the images in your portfolio should be as dramatic and memorable as possible. Better yet, have some photo business cards made of some of your most dramatic images so that the client can keep your "cool photo" in his/her Rolodex(tm).

Make sure that the photos you use in your portfolio are in good taste. Any nudes or revealing work should be fine-art or fashion oriented. Most clients will shy away from a model that has photos that look like he/she is trying to be a porn star. Also be careful if you are traveling outside the country. In many middle eastern countries it is a crime to bring nude photos into the country, and if you do so, you may end up being arrested and jailed.

If you have an especially great photo session (where every photo turns out great and it's hard to choose the "best") you may want to include a contact sheet (proof page) from the session in your portfolio. That way a client can see a diverse range of poses all on one print.

Put Contact Numbers on EVERYTHING

Okay, you've dropped off your portfolio -- but never got a call back.

Now when you arrive -- they can't find your portfolio -- and no one has a clue where it is!

Be sure to keep your name, your agency's name, and contact phone numbers in your portfolio. That way if your book is lost or stolen, it can hopefully be returned to you. A great suggestion is to typeset this information and put it in the first page of your portfolio.

You should always keep your portfolio with you (at all times). You never know when you're going to get a call for an audition, and your portfolio should be at your side ready to go. However, some agencies will want to show your portfolio in their offices, and some clients may want to keep your portfolio to look at. Rather than leaving your "official big" portfolio, an effective alternative is to create "copy" portfolios which have the same prints but only smaller in size. The miniature portfolio has 5x7" or 4x5" prints instead of the larger 8x10 or 9x12 or 11x14" prints.

Most photographers will give you a very good price break when you are getting multiple prints made from the same exact poses, and this is a wonderful way to have multiple portfolios out there marketing your image for you. Another alternative is to make up portfolio books that use laser copies (color photocopies) rather than actual photographs. Make sure you have the photographer's written permission to make copies of the photographs if you are planning to do this.

What Size Do I Get?

Portfolios come in a range of sizes, and most professional agencies will give you a book with their name imprinted on the cover. Most often the books are 9x12" or 11x14" -- so that a full size magazine page can fit in the book without folding. I prefer the 11x14" books, simply because larger prints seem more impressive and more professional. Either way, ask your agency for their preference before purchasing a book or prints.

If your agency does not have a "purchase ready" portfolio book for you, you can purchase them from art supply stores. In art supply stores, ask for a "presentation case with acetate pages." These come in standard sizes of 8x10", 9x12", 11x14", 16x20", and 20x24" portfolios. Most come with 10 pages, and each page will hold 2 prints (one front and one back).

How Often do I Update the Portfolio?

Remember that you will be hired based on the looks in your portfolio. If your looks change, you need to update your photos. It's extremely unprofessional to not have updated photos in your portfolio. Consider the situation where you might be hired based on the look of your composite card or portfolio, and you show up with a completely different hairstyle and color of hair. You've just cost everyone a lot of time and money, and you will not be seen with "good favor" by anyone on the project.

At the minimum, every 6 months all your photos in your portfolio should be replaced. First... your looks change. Second, it provides you with a "realistic work goal" to try to get at least 15 bookings within a 6 month span.

Hopefully the ongoing jobs and testing you do with photographers will give you a constant supply of new photos. Again, make sure that if you change your look to get new photos right away. Even if you don't change your look, it's helpful to get new photos taken every couple of months just to keep in "practice" posing for the camera.

What are Composite Cards (Comp Cards, Index Cards, Zeds/Seds)?

Composite cards go by many different names. They were originally created by a German named Sabastian Sed (pronounced Zed). Because of the difference in German and English pronunciations, Seds became known as Zeds. Composite cards are miniature portfolios which are mass produced. They are kind of like business cards, only larger (normally 5-1/2" x 8-1/2"). The front of the composite card is usually a model's headshot with her name typeset on the photo (or on a border of the photo), and the back has a series of photos featuring the model in different photographic styles. The back of the card also typically has the model's stats (age, measurements, hair & eye color, weight, height, clothing sizes, etc.) as well as the contact information for the agency the model is signed with.

If the model has particularly good features or special talents, that is also often listed on the composite card.

Most comp cards are black and white, however, many from larger agencies are in full color. The actual style of the comp card can vary widely, so many agencies have a "stock design" that they recommend that models use. As with portfolio photos, models are responsible for paying for their own composite cards. Since you'll need a new set of comp cards each year, don't buy "in bulk" just to end up throwing away hundreds of unused cards. When you are starting out, 100-200 is a good number to order. You can always get more in the future if you run out.

If you are not with an agency, a professional photographer who shoots composites and portfolios can help in recommending photo selection, design, and a good local printer. There are also numerous companies who print up composite cards through "mail order." Make sure to request samples of their work before making an order, because quality levels vary drastically among suppliers.

Another possibility is to make "photocopy-comps." A high quality color photocopier (or a computer with a quality scanner and high-quality color printer) can allow you to create some temporary composite cards until you are ready to have work professionally printed (for instance, if you need better photos, if you don't have money to print off a large batch, if you are waiting to get signed by an agency and want to use their format, etc.).

Composite cards are meant to be given out generously. Always keep some in your portfolio to hand out to clients, and make sure that you keep a ready supply with your agency so that they can send them out to prospects as well.

What Else Can I Try?

Have some photo business cards printed up (a miniature version of your comp card) which you can keep in a purse and hand out generously to any business contact you meet.

Get a web portfolio designed and keep it updated with current photos and information about your rates and how to book you for jobs.

Try to do collaborative projects with photographers to come up with postcards, greeting cards, posters, or calendars which promote both your talents. These might be sold or simply given away to prospective clients (one heck of a way to keep the client thinking about hiring you!).

Volunteer to do FREE modeling for local charities in their printed advertising campaigns. The more people see your face (for whatever cause or product) the more interest people will have in hiring you in the future.

Enter hometown beauty pageants and modeling contests. It's a great opportunity for you to tell the world (in your introductory speech) that you are a professional model working in the field of (some work) in the community of (so many people).

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Sometimes the difference between a good photo seems totally intangible.

There are, however, some very concrete elements you should look for when choosing which photos to have printed for your **Portfolio and Composites**.

1. A comfortable and logical pose that fits the wardrobe, facial expression, lighting, and overall mood of the shoot. whether a pose is additional or catalog style it should never look forced
2. A facial expression that seems natural not as though you're trying too hard, but not too understand either.
3. Visual interest, good contrast, good line or movement in the composition, and some texture.
4. The energy level should be high, even in pensive or moody shots.

5. **For shots in which the model is looking** into the camera there must be excellent eye contact. The eyes should not look dreamy, unfocused, or vague. For shots in which the model is looking away from the lens, her eye must be positioned so that her iris is sufficiently apparent or her eyeball will look entirely white, a kind of "exorcist" effect. In order to achieve good eye position, sometimes the model has to "fudge" and focus her eyes on a spot that is closer to the camera than she would if she were really looking in the direction that her head position indicates.

6. The camera emphasizes all imperfections. If a flaw is apparent on the contact sheet, you can bet it will look three times as bad on the final print. There should be no stains, sweater snags, missing buttons, wild hairs, unnatural or overt wrinkles in the clothing, or smudged makeup. Resist the urge to print up a shot that contains this type of imperfection, even if the pose, lighting, and facial expression are excellent. The eye will be drawn to the out of place detail first.

7. When choosing which pictures to have blown up into prints, always juxtapose them with the shots you've already got, if any. For instance, if you already have a smiling, pretty middle of the road head shot, you may want to choose a different expression from your next contact sheet, perhaps a shot with a more serious or sultry mood. If you already have an active body shot, say one that shows you through water in a bathing suit or playing tennis in a tank top and shorts, you may want to go for a more sedate and sophisticated pose from your next batch of shots, perhaps a pose in an evening dress.

If it's financially feasible for you, it can be beneficial to narrow your choices down to two favorite shots per setup and have them both printed before you decide which of them to use on your composite or in your portfolio. Even after having made thousands of prints, I'm still surprised occasionally by the way an 8" x 10" can look very different from its contact print. Keep in mind that the negatives remain the property of [Baron DaParre](#) / [Baron's Visual Images](#).

What should you do if you and your agent disagree on which shot or shots to print? We recommend using the agent's choice for your portfolio and getting a print of the one that you like for personal use. Some models have the attitude, "Well, it's my print, my portfolio, and my money. I have to live with it, so I'll pick the one I want." This may be true, but it's no that simple an issue. If you allow your agent to choose your promotional material for you, you may have a more lucrative modeling career. And there's one more good reason to let your agent have the final say in choosing your prints for you. Your promotional material reflects on the agency. If they are not happy with the prints you choose to include in your composite and portfolio, they'll be less likely to send them out to clients. But if they're happy with your photos, which is more likely if you let them choose them, they'll probably promote you much harder.

How can you be a better judge of which shots should be made into prints? Are there any guidelines for how to choose the most attractive and marketable photos?

1. Always sleep on it. Never decide on the spur of the moment. Your first impression is rarely a lasting one when it comes to your own face.
2. If possible, always consult with an agent when choosing which shots to print. An agent will be more objective. They are professionals who know the market better than anyone else possible.

3. View the contact sheet several times a day for at least two or three days. Each time you look at it, use a grease pen to indicate the ones that catch your eye and to help you narrow the field. Mark the ones that others have liked, as well. (Use different marks for yourself, your agent,

your friends, and so on.) If you change your mind, you can scrape the marks off with your fingernail.

4. Buy a magnifying loupe, a glass that makes prints seem bigger to the eye and can help you get a better idea of what the final print will look like. A loupe may draw your attention to the details that seem inconsequential to the naked eye. Glare, a shadow, a stray hair in the eyes, a missing button, or slightly droopy eyelids may make the difference between a good and bad shot.

5. Cut a square out of the center of a blank piece of paper or cardboard approximately 1"x 1 1/4" in size. This is proportionate to the dimensions of an 8"x 10" print, and it will help you get a better idea of what the composition of the photos will be like once it's blown up. It can also help you decide whether a certain photo needs special cropping.

6. If you have trouble imagining what the shot will look like from the sliding the cut over it, try sampling blocking in the cropping that you prefer with a china marker or grease pencil.

7. Ask for feedback from your mother, spouse, friends, and others, but take it with a grain of salt. Everyone to whom you are important has different ideas and expectations about how they want you to look, and they probably don't have any idea what kind of looks are marketable in your city. However, listening to their ideas about the positive and negative things they see in each photo may help you look at the shots with a fresh perspective.

8. Try to put yourself in the shoes of the clients, those you hope

will offer you modeling or acting work on the basis of your photos. If

you owned a company that sold casual clothing, how would you want

a model to look in one of your advertisements? What if you owned a

company that sold medical supplies or wallpaper?