

HOW TO PREPARE FOR PORTFOLIO REVIEW EVENTS

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Introducing yourself and your work to industry professionals at a portfolio review event is a proven path to relationships. These popular events are growing regionally and nationally. Review events offer participants opportunities to share work with members of our field who can make a difference in your career. Registration fees vary; events organized by non-profit organizations are typically less expensive than those run by for-profit businesses. Some offer accompanying educational programming, enriching your overall experience.

Portfolio review sessions typically last 15 to 20 minutes, and some even 30 minutes. The number of sessions you will have depends on the scale and length of the event, but you should be aware in advance and balance expectation. To ensure return on this investment, do your homework on the event and the reviewers. Understand the selection process and all related policies. Study all the reviewers participating, not just those you hope to meet with. Carefully consider which work to print, and prepare your presentation to be shared within the stated time limits. Lastly, create memorable leave-behind pieces and follow up with professionals who responded positively to your work.

GOALS & RESEARCH

Be clear about what you want to accomplish: Is your goal to receive feedback on a body of work in progress? Are you seeking advice regarding technique, editing, and presentation? Are you asking for advice regarding gallery contacts, photo editors, art directors, graphic designers, editorial assignments, or commissions? Do you have a completed body of work and wish to gain an understanding of the priorities of museum venues in order to submit a strong proposal? Or, do you wish this initial opportunity to be primarily a chance to introduce yourself and your work? At the start of your review, let the reviewer know what you hope to gain as you begin your session. If this is your first portfolio review event, be sure to let them know that, too, as an experienced reviewer can help manage the time and make the most of your time together.

Most event organizers will give you a chance to submit a “wish list” prioritizing the Portfolio Reviewers you most want to meet with. Research each professional deeply, exploring previous positions, current affiliations and industry activities, requesting sessions with those who are most likely to respond positively to your work and help to accomplish your desired goals. Once you receive a final list of Reviewers that have been assigned to you, remember that you may have the chance to meet others so broad research is best.

TIGHTLY EDIT & PRACTICE YOUR PRESENTATION

Edit your presentation to a number of images that allows you to present your body of work in an efficient manner. If you have two or more bodies of work, perhaps one has been completed, another may be on-going or even just begun, consider bringing smaller selections (even smaller sizes) of each and ask which the reviewer would prefer to see. While there is likely time to *look* at everything you want to share, be mindful that it may be impossible to *discuss* all work you bring. Base your selection of photographs on your overall goals.

Practice your presentation - keep it short and simple! Plan to speak clearly and concisely on your work and make sure that your presentation takes less time than your full session so that there will be time left for the Reviewer to provide feedback/advice.

PRESENTATION & PRINT HANDLING

The old adage is true: you only have one chance to make a ‘first impression.’

Reviewers realize that the majority of you will be traveling to the event and have size constraints on what you can carry on an airplane, train, or bus. They don’t expect you to bring a large, matted portfolio with interleaving tissue between each print, or individual plastic covers to be removed. This type of presentation is cumbersome for you and time consuming, taking time away from sharing your prints. Consider removing bags and any interleaving tissue before your sessions. Find a balance between what you feel best conveys your body of work without compromising the safety of your fine prints.

If presenting a body of work (or two), print your images in a similar style on the same type/size paper you have selected for that series. If possible, bring samples of what you consider exhibition-quality prints: if larger than what you can carry or easily ship, bring several examples in a tube, or cut/taped to fit into the same size box that the remainder of your presentation will fit into. If these larger prints have been exhibited, it is helpful to share an installation view, perhaps as the initial image you share with Reviewers. If you are not sure of what paper/size is best for a current project, showing the reviewers samples of those options can lend valuable, timely advice. If you are hoping to effectively introduce your work to professionals for purposes of exhibition or gallery representation, realize that a digital presentation can never convey your sense of craft. That said, an electronic portfolio component can easily convey the depth of a larger, long-term body of work. If your project or series is at a point that help with editing would be useful, bring an additional small set of prints (even machine prints) for that specific purpose.

The folding tables you will be presenting your work on will be approximately 3’x6’; if your final print size is larger than that, have several samples rolled in tubes with a supplemental, more manageable portfolio for general viewing.

Select a box, book, or portfolio that allows you to show the photographs relatively quickly and safely and be seen without damaging the prints. Some prefer a drop-down box, enabling you to slide the work out rather than lifting the work out of a tight, fixed-sided box. Remember that you will be moving work in/out/in/out frequently over the course of the reviews - the set of prints you bring will become your presentation set and are likely to show some wear over time.

Consider making a small "portable" portfolio to have with you at all times throughout all events, i.e. a box of 4x5s, an 8x10 presentation book of prints, or laser/inkjet copies to be able to share your work with other photographers and reviewers if there is an opportunity outside the formal review sessions.

KNOW THE REVIEWERS

I encourage you to print a copy of all the reviewer biographies and insert alphabetically into a 3-ring binder to keep at your fingertips. Research their institutions by looking at previous exhibitions, the broader holdings of their collections, their outreach and educational programs: this will help you to know the mission and audience of their venue. Additionally, search for books they may have written, contributions to academic texts and more will further help you to know their personal passions in our broader field. With a simple system such as a binder you can easily and efficiently refresh your memory prior to your one-on-one meeting. (You may have the chance to add additional meetings to your schedule - ask the staff what the procedure is if there is a 'no-show'.)

Reviewers will appreciate the efforts you make to prepare for your session with them.

In your binder you can also leave space for your notes following each of your meetings. Some photographers include visual reminders to themselves, checking off boxes indicating which group of images they showed to this Reviewer, did they give them their promo card, did they ask for their business card, and so forth. The time you have together will go quickly, so by being prepared and pacing yourself you have the best chance of an efficient and productive meeting.

PREPARE PROMOTIONAL MATERIALS FOR REVIEWERS

Produce a simple promotional piece (print) that will serve to remind the reviewers of your work, as well as providing them with your current contact information; use an image shared during the event for better recollection. Make sure it is small enough for reviewers to file in a traditional (8-1/2 x 11) folder for ease in referencing your work. Multiple pages / sheets should have your name and contact information on EACH page should they get separated. I don't encourage photographers to invest in a print-on-demand summary of their work before the event to give to all their assigned Reviewers – chances are you will know the work better, alter your edit/sequence of the work and so forth.

WHEN ATTENDING THE REVIEW

TIMING IS EVERYTHING! If you are late for your scheduled review appointment, the time will not be made up.

Be courteous to fellow photographers by respecting the appointment time and pack up your materials before the next person's session is set to begin. Your colleagues will appreciate this and reviewers will be aware of your professionalism.

Do not assume that each and every Reviewer wishes to keep more than a simple business or promotional card to refresh their memory of your meeting. Offering to ship the items you shared on to their office following the event at your expense is a great courtesy (and a wonderful opportunity for you to thank them after the meeting).

Additionally, do not assume that each Reviewer will find your work of interest to their audience for future exhibition or publishing projects. If this is the case you can ask if they can suggest colleagues they feel would have an interest in and an audience for your work.

Be sure to ask reviewers for their contact details if you intend to write and thank them for their advice, and to add them to your industry mailing list.

Lastly, ask if they would like to be kept informed of your work as it evolves, and if so, in what format? Sending something in print via US Mail? A link to a PDF? Or do they prefer that you update them via email, and if so, what should the subject line say? This is a rare opportunity to set the course for continuing the dialogue, and plan on following their preferences.

MAKE NOTES

Make notes for your reference as soon as possible following each session on the bio sheets you prepared – who you saw, their comments on the work and/or on specific images, printing, presentation, general advice, and other remarks you will want to review.

In addition to making notes directly on these pages, consider bringing an audio recording device to capture your session with reviewers, adding a voice memo app to your phone, so you can listen to the reviewer's advice again. Recording the session also affords you the opportunity to be engaged face-to-face rather than taking notes throughout your meeting. ALWAYS ask their permission before recording, and presume that permissions granted are for your personal use only – do not quote conversations in any public form (such as Facebook, Twitter, your website) without additional permissions. (not every Reviewer will agree to this).

Keep your business and/or promotional cards handy, and distribute them. Ask for cards from other professionals at the event to add to (or begin) your promotional mailing list. I encourage you to exchange cards with fellow photographers, too, and maintain contact with your professional community. This is your peer group and you will continue to learn from each other's experience if you stay in touch.

AFTER THE EVENT

Write each reviewer and thank them for their insights towards your work, their advice and the time they gave to you, and respond to their comments and suggestions directly. I encourage clearly reminding them that they met you at the event you attended. Ideally, your promo will have an image that you shared with Reviewers at the event – this too will help the Reviewers connect your name with your work. If you choose email rather than a hand-written note, be mindful of the subject line – perhaps “Met at (event name) Reviews.”

In summary: you will initiate relationships at portfolio review events – it is up to you to cultivate those relationships after the event. Take the time to keep the community apprised of your current projects, when that work is ready for exhibition/publication, what is next for you and your creative practice.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MARY VIRGINIA SWANSON is an educator, author and entrepreneur in the field of photography, and a respected advisor to artists and arts organizations. Unique in our field, her broad background includes exhibiting, collecting, licensing and marketing photographs and affords her a range of perspectives on making and marketing art. Ms. Swanson counts among her consulting clients a range of internationally respected artists and institutions.

Swanson co-authored with Darius Himes the acclaimed *Publish Your Photography Book: Revised & Updated* (2014) and continues to stay current on the growing market for photobooks, reflecting both the relative ease of self-publishing and the rise of the collectible photographic artists book.

Swanson received the Focus Award for Lifetime Achievement in Photography from the Griffin Museum in Boston in 2013, the 2014 Susan Carr Award for Education from the American Society for Media Photographers (ASMP) and was named 2015 Honored Educator by the Society for Photographic Education.

Swanson frequently serves as a judge on contemporary photography and photobook competitions, a portfolio reviewer at industry events, presents lectures and conducts workshops on professional practices.

Throughout the year, Swanson hosts a range of workshops and retreats around the country. Upcoming courses are listed at mvswanson.com/workshop.

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