



Building an Effective Presentation Book

by Brad Cruickshank

An attractive, well-planned presentation book establishes your credibility. Although many of us realize the advantages of having a book, we're still a little lazy, and perhaps a little embarrassed about tooting our own horns. But even if it feels immodest to talk up projects or show off your various certifications, your clients don't necessarily perceive this as bragging. In fact, most of mine are thankful for any information I provide. It gives them something to base their decision on when it comes time to pick a remodeler for the job. And the photos can also give your customers ideas for their own project.

The Never-Ending Story

My presentation book began as an outgrowth of my interest in entering design competitions, especially after I won a few. Taking the time to get presentation photos is a real nuisance when there are jobs to bid and other projects to pursue. I began entering competitions as a way of forcing myself to get good photos of our best jobs. Also, since I've been in business for just under five years, having award-winning projects in my book gives my business the appearance of success and stability.

As an active member of the National Association of the Remodeling Industry (NARI), I regularly

enter their Contractor of the Year (COTY) contest. To prepare for the January 1 entry deadline, I pull things together in a frantic process between Christmas and New Year's. The photography takes a day, and I work late into the night laying out the book, preparing drawings, and composing the text. I use a professional lab, not a quick photo shop, and I usually end up paying rush photo printing charges. But it's the only way I ever get it done.

My presentation book is constantly "in process." When my COTY contest photos come back in March, I rearrange my book to incorporate the new photos and to retire any photos that are dated or no longer appropriate. But to avoid the frustration of trying to close a nice sale in February with my best and only photos off being judged, I often get duplicate prints of some of the shots I used for the competition so I don't have to wait. I also work on my book at other times throughout the year, especially when we've just completed an exciting project that I want to include.

Page by Page

It's important to evaluate your book's appearance and effectiveness in relation to your clients. My book has to appeal to the well-educated, upper-income professionals for whom I do most of my work. I use a 10x12-inch, black leatherette ring binder with acetate pages. It looks substantial without being ostentatious. Some people advocate a leather cover, but this strikes me as unnecessary. Ditto on the gold-embossed company name or initials on the cover.

The first two pages of my book hold a copy of my business license and my certificate of insurance. These are followed by my engineering and architecture degrees, and membership documents in various trade organizations and the Better Business Bureau. I also include certificates showing that I am a Certified Remodeler, Certified Graduate Remodeler, and Certified Pella Contractor.

The next several pages are devoted to published or award-winning projects and distinctions. I position projects covered by local and national magazines first, with the magazine title banner prominently displayed to visually link me and my company to something familiar to the prospective client. I paste these up myself and use a

color copier to make them look professional. The remainder of the book holds project plans and photos, followed by thank you letters from clients.

I frequently change my mind about how my book should be organized. My latest approach is to subdivide it according to different types of jobs. I intend to add labeled dividers so I'll have sections devoted to kitchens and baths, exterior work, whole house remodels, and so on. That way the clients and I can forego all the pages describing projects unrelated to what they have in mind. This arrangement will also let me use the book exclusively for ideas and details. I can skip the promotional stuff and flip to a certain section to show clients a photo of a living room with an ogee crown molding or a bathroom with tile flooring set in a running bond pattern.

Color and layout are extremely important. If you don't have a good eye for these things, get some help from someone who does. I try to use two-page spreads on each project so clients can see the whole story without having to flip pages (see Figure 1). On each two-page spread I include one full-color, 8x10-inch photo along with two smaller, full-color detail shots. The smaller shots help my book to convey my company's attention to detail. For maximum effect, I lay out "before" shots on the same two-page spread with photos of the finished project. The before photos are black and white because that's the way most magazines present them and it's what design competitions usually require. Also, black-and-whites will make dreary rooms look even drearier.

Along with photos, I include the plans for each project. To get plans to fit comfortably in the book, I redraw them on 8 1/2 x 11-inch paper (see Figure 2). But good presentation drawings should be more than blueprints at a smaller scale. You also need to omit excess detail and simplify them for graphic clarity. I've recently hired an architecture student from a local college to do the redraws, which is a great way to get good quality for less cost. I also intend to try working with aspiring photography majors for project photos.

Pics and Plans

The most important part of the presentation book is the photos. It might be worthwhile to use profes-



Figure 1. Wherever possible, the author uses a two-page spread containing a variety of before and after photos from a single project. This helps to showcase his company's attention to detail and makes it easy for clients to get the whole story without flipping pages.

3D Presentation Drawing

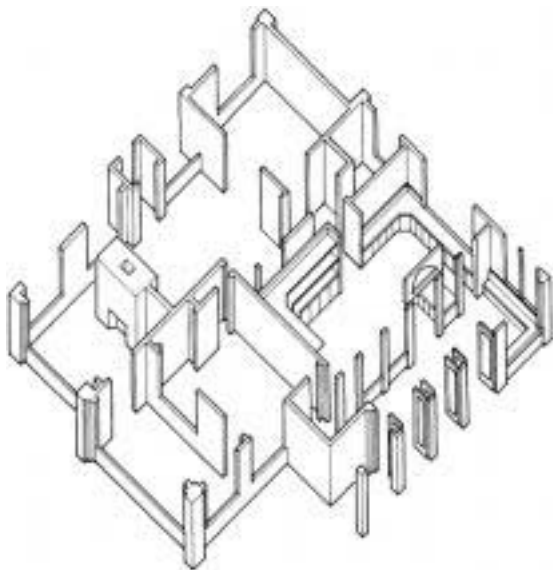


Figure 2. Simplify any drawings you include in your presentation book by omitting unnecessary details. Three-dimensional "presentation drawings" are easier for clients to understand than scaled down blueprints.

sional photographers, but be careful. I've used them twice and wound up with mixed results and whopping bills. In my area, professionals charge \$125 per hour, plus film and prints at marked-up rates. But price doesn't necessarily get results. The first time I used a professional, I loved the shots — they were suitable for the cover of a magazine. The second time, however, the photographer's lab lost the negatives and most of the prints I got were smeared with ink from the photographer's stamp on the back of another print. The shots themselves were only fair. Be certain to find a photographer who is good at architectural photography instead of one who specializes in travel, food, or portraits. I recently found a moonlighter who charges only \$50 per hour plus processing costs.

Here are a few rules I've learned for making the most of the photographer's time and ability:

- Wait until you have several projects to shoot, then line up the photographer for a half day. This makes better use of everybody's time.
- Set up everything in advance. I sketch out or list all of the items I want photographed, and I specify whether I want large or small shots of each.
- Go to the projects ahead of time and set up the shots.

Good photography takes time — about an hour per shot once lights and equipment are unpacked. A good photographer will shoot a Polaroid photo first to check lighting and composition. These are worth hanging onto until your prints arrive. I actually lay out the book using the Polaroids, and homeowners often ask me to leave a few with them.

Remember that composition is extremely important. Again, if this isn't your forté, get some help from someone else. Pay attention to details and accessories. Downplay the mundane and emphasize the extraordinary. A fresh flower arrangement or a stack of fluffy towels at the edge of the tub can make a big difference in a photo. And don't forget to remove the half-used bar of soap at the sink and the rubber bath mat draped over the edge of the tub.

When all else fails, go out and buy yourself a \$500, fully automatic camera with a zoom and a wide-angle lens. The cost is less than a half-day of a photographer's time, and if you have time to fuss around with it, you may get some good shots. ■

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