Chapter 9

Creating written content

"Someone showing their art should at least pretend they're competent," I heard a student sneer while surfing a site. That was harsh, but it's easy to criticize when you know the difference between good and bad work. Writing is no different. Whether you're dyslexic or just hate writing, you can't afford to be embarrassed publicly.

The easiest way to avoid the issue is to design a portfolio with no written content—just your contact information. This risky strategy can work for some disciplines (animation comes to mind) but is deadly for most design areas. Too much of what makes a good designer is in the decisions. For those, viewers need some context.

Fortunately, you don't have to be a brilliant author to write competently. What you absolutely need to know can be learned, and most of what's left can be handled by a combination of software and patience.

This chapter will help you figure out how much text your portfolio needs, prevent you from making the very worst writing errors, and help you keep the visual and verbal elements of your portfolio in synch.

What to write and why

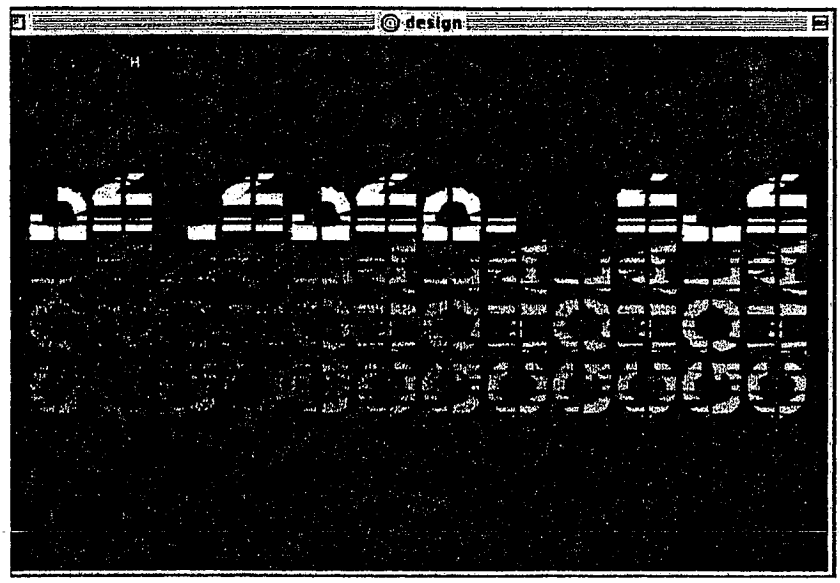
You choose your samples carefully and attempt to craft a seamless presentation. What you write is equally important. People often want to know about your career or education, what you contributed to a project, and how you solve visual problems. They need a sense of who you are. The right text in the right place can help them do that.

Some types of text are more important in your portfolio than others, so if you don't write well, you can concentrate on these critical elements. In order of necessity, you will write to:

- Identify your work.
- Introduce yourself.
- Explain your ideas and process.
- Speak directly to your audience.

Identifying your work

Even a minimalist portfolio includes captions keyed to the work. Your captions should include the client and a short title. Either the title or another line of the caption should specify what role you played in the project (art direction, illustrations, or programming, for example). The title can be descriptive ("graphics and art direction for") or a formal work title ("Beyorn identity package").



jon@commonspace.fm
If you are mixing different types of work in your captions, give people a visual cue that tells them which it is. Jon Santos uses simple quote marks to distinguish a description from a simple title, but initial capital letters, a typeface, or formatting change will work as well.

Distinguish between these captions and the descriptions of the work. Captions are not the place to explain your design ideas and process.

Check your facts...don't depend on your memory for titles, names, and spelling. Don't use abbreviations for the client name unless it is so well known that everyone will recognize it.

Portfolios in second languages

Creativity is international. It's possible that you are now working in a different country from where you started. If so, you might not be as solid a writer in your adopted language as in your native one. To a point, potential employers or clients will accept imperfections in your writing if they know that you are working in your second language, particularly if you present yourself well in person.

That doesn't give you carte blanche to butcher your adopted language in print. In fact, if you are looking for a job where you are likely to be working with text, not just image, it is extremely important that you convey your ability to maneuver in your second language. If you don't, people could wonder if you will misunderstand instructions or make expensive or embarrassing errors under deadline pressure.

You should not only follow the guidelines in this chapter for proofing your work—you should take them one step further. If at all possible, have a native speaker read your text before you post it.

INTRODUCING YOURSELF

Your portfolio presentation must include some personal information. You provide that with some text about yourself—a résumé, bio, or cover letter.

The résumé

The classic professional writing requirement is the résumé. There are scads of books and workshops on creating effective résumés. None of them are worth squat to a creative. With the exception of academic vitae, the résumé is secondary to your portfolio. It could get you in the door at a large company's human resources department, but it will never get you a job. It can, in fact, have the opposite effect. A sloppy résumé can be the tipping point when a company is having a tough time choosing among a short list of candidates.

The best advice anyone can give you about writing a résumé is: Keep it clean, visually and verbally. Then make sure that it contains no errors (see "The telltale signs of bad writing" section that follows). Send it through a spell checker every time you edit it. Get other people to read it—the more eyes, the better.

Clean also means spare. Few résumés need to be longer than one page, even if you've already had a long career. Older experience tends to become less relevant as time passes and can be cut or radically condensed. Education is an example. It's important when you've just graduated, but after you've had even one job in the real world, it belongs at the bottom of the page. By the time you're heading for your second job, details (such as your grade point average) should disappear as well.

Another "delete me" is the Objective that management gurus tell you to put at the top of your résumé. The only time you might find one useful is if you've had an unusual career. When you've done a variety of work that you need to tie together or you're making a radical change (from exhibit designer to interactive designer, for example), an objective can help you explain the transition: "My objective is to leverage my experience with wayfinding in physical space to designing for the virtual environment."

Brevity is a creative blessing. Text-heavy résumés written by and for creatives simply don't get read. No paragraph should be longer than four sentences, and no sentence should run longer than four lines, assuming about 30 picas a line and ten point type. Shorter is even better. Stick to your responsibilities, range of work, and most significant accomplishments. Or simply take a sentence to explain what you did and then list the clients you did it for. You can always elaborate in person.

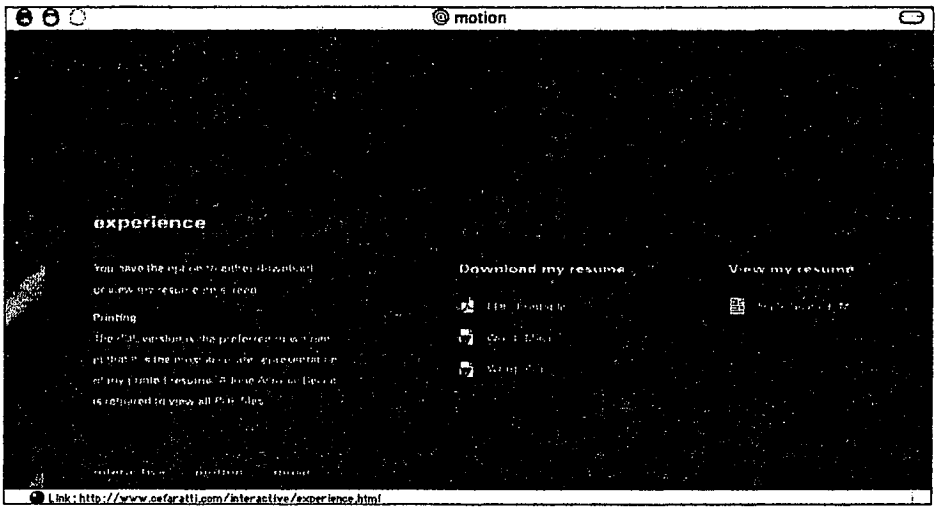
A résumé is best written and designed to be printed and read offline. That means it should not include anything that will slow the download and tempt someone to break the connection. No placed art of any kind. And use your name as the file title, not "résumé." How will anyone remember whom your PDF belongs to otherwise?

Your résumé and your portfolio

When you send email, of course you'll include your résumé with your samples. You'll also include it on a CD or DVD. But these portfolio forms are most useful when you have a personal contact or know of a specific hiring opportunity. With an online digital portfolio, you can choose either to include your résumé or replace it with short descriptive text and contact information. Some people deal with the résumé question by creating a download link to their PDFs. There's nothing wrong with this approach, and it has many positive results. It ensures that your name will find its way into a paper file and encourages viewers to find out more about you while your portfolio is still fresh in their minds.

In some situations, you might want to use the bio plus contact approach. Separating your résumé from your portfolio can be useful for three reasons:

- **Confidentiality.** When you put your résumé on a standard Web page, its text will be searchable in engines such as Google. Although this might seem to be a good thing, remember that few people will search on your name. Instead, your site will come up most frequently when they look for information on your prior—or current—place of employment. If you are actively looking for a new job while you're still employed or have had issues with a former employer that might come up in an interview, this information might be better left less accessible.



www.cefaratti.com
Mike Cefaratti doesn't include a bio on his site, but he makes it easy to view his résumé. Like most designers, he prefers that people read his PDF because he has designed it. But he makes no assumptions about the technology of his potential clientele. You can read his résumé online in a Web page or even download a Word file (Mac or PC formatted).

- **Contact.** Handing out your résumé without requiring any contact takes a possible point of control away from you. After all, your résumé is only important to a company if they are already intrigued by your work. If they email to request the résumé, you have instantaneous feedback on your site. You also have an opportunity to present yourself in a less formal, more personal way—and gain a contact name for future mailings.
- **Customizing.** Waiting to send your résumé on request also allows you to customize it slightly to each query. You can create one or two alternate résumés to keep on hand for different situations, sending the most appropriate one when asked. Or you can use it as an opportunity to gain points. After you know who wants your résumé, you can visit their site to find out more about them. If you've done a project that's directly relevant to their clientele but isn't in your digital portfolio, a PDF along with the résumé can show not only what a good fit you'd be, but that you think fast.

The bio

People don't always need your full story. A good compromise is a short bio or note that describes your experience and expertise. An online bio, like most Web text, should be as short as you can make it while still hitting what you feel are your most important points. If you are looking for clients instead of employment, your bio should emphasize your capabilities or the type of work you do.

Remember that your text introduction is not a résumé replacement. It's a centering device to give a reader a way to look at your work.

The telltale signs of bad writing

As someone who sees lots of student résumés, I've been treated to many remarkable writing errors in portfolios and résumés. They don't make the potential employer feel confident, although they can brighten up a tense day at the sender's expense. My personal favorites...the one who claimed proficiency in "Adope Photoshot" and the person who misspelled his own name.

Louis Etudiantia
9975 55th Street, San Dorito, CA 90335
Phone: 415 9939999
Email: clari€tudi99@aol.com

Objective:
To tap my creative potential while utilizing my technical and design skills in a position that allows me to develop both personally and professionally.

Schooling:
1997
BFA in Graphic Design, College of the Arts,
University of Erewhon, Boston, MA.

Experience:
Etudianta Associates
October '01 to present

Web design, print and identity packages for small to medium-sized businesses and indivdduals. Responsible for managing freelance illustrators and production assistants, handled billing and client services.

Web Designer, Megaproductions Unlimited
June '98 - October '01

Created site maps, designed interface and managed production of over 25 major Website rollouts. Clients included NetEd.com, BristleWorks.com, Petcetera.com, Freezerworks Limited, and Animationworks.

Graphic Designer, Fairweather Studios
June 98 - June '99

Print and identity design and production for San Dorito's award-winning "Save the Wheels" campaign. Designed book covers for Grapefruit Publications. Responsible for ten covers per week on topics ranging from corporate ethics to pet care.

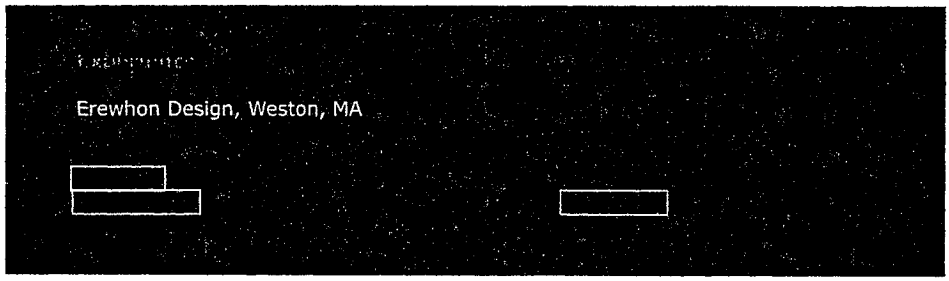
References:
Will be furnished upon request.

Sometimes you get so wrapped up in your work that you miss something truly mortifying. Look carefully at the graphic device of these initial caps. What do they spell?

Want to look bad in print? Here are a few ways to do it.

Lousy spelling

In the age of spell checkers, there is no excuse for misspelled words. They tell people that you are sloppy. Spell check even if you think you are good at spelling. Everyone has some words they consistently spell incorrectly, and everyone makes typographical errors.



This is an excerpt from a real online résumé, replicated with its identifying information eliminated or altered to protect its maker. The résumé itself is very nicely designed but has a remarkable amount of errors for one short paragraph.

The highlighted words in the copy are all misspelled or mistyped.

This is the same paragraph as the previous one. Besides its misspellings, it has two major grammatical problems. The yellow triangle indicates a place where a word is missing. The person might have thought that the word "developing" in the first part of the sentence didn't need to be repeated in the next phrase. The verbs "work," "present," and "managing" should all be in the same form. "Manageeing" should have been simply "manage."

continues

continued

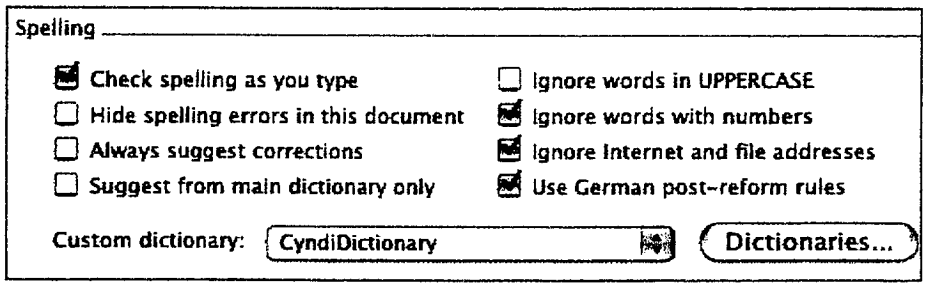
Bad grammar

If you don't spell well, chances are your grammar isn't perfect either. Grammatical errors are trickier to catch than spelling errors but can lead to real embarrassment when they make their way into your portfolio.

Microsoft Word can be irritating, but it does a pretty good job of preventing the worst grammatical goofs. In it, you can select Tools>Spelling and Grammar at any point and check your document for errors. Of course, that means you have to remember to run a check when you write or make changes. If you don't mind interruptions as you work, set Word to prompt you. To do this, go to File>Preferences (Windows and Mac Classic OS)/Word>Preferences (Mac OS X). In the dialog box, you can choose to have Word highlight spelling and grammar errors as you type, so you can fix problems as they arise.

Fractured headlines

One little-known fact about spell checkers is that they don't check words in all capital letters unless you tell them to. You are less likely to notice mistakes in all cap words because they are usually headlines or captions. Allowing Word to check uppercase words is usually worth the added hassle of false positives.



After you've unchecked the default "Ignore words in uppercase," Word will stop you on every acronym it doesn't know. To avoid this problem, create a custom dictionary. In the Word preferences dialog box, there's a spelling and grammar section. Select it, then click Dictionaries. In the next dialog box, you can add a personal dictionary. (I like to put mine in the Office folder where Word's default dictionary lives.) The first time Word stops you on an acronym such as AIGA, add it to your custom dictionary. Not only will Word stop bothering you, but it will alert you when you mistype the acronym in the future.

Photoshop blindspots

You can type text into every art and design program. Unless you are a good typist and speller, don't do it. Write everything in a text program that has a spell-check function and then cut and paste the text into whatever image or development program you're using.

▲ Top | Print this page | Home | Company | Services | Concepts | Portfolio | Contact | Login

Photoshop and many other design and illustration programs don't have a spell-check function. This is an example of a common error.

Verbal diarrhea

Strange but true—people who hate to write almost always write too much once they start. Just as minimalist design is the art of deleting until you get it right, the trick to good writing is good cutting.

Too many "and"s

Don't use the word "and" unless it's in a series of things. "Books, periodicals, *and* annual reports" is fine. "This project was created to serve the needs of the client who wanted to focus their brand *and* they planned to use it for future online projects," is incorrect. It's actually two sentences glued together. Run-on sentences, besides being bad writing, are hard to read and understand onscreen.

Capital objects

In general, you should only capitalize words that begin a sentence, are proper names, or are initials (such as UI for user interface). Excessive capitalization puts emphasis where emphasis doesn't belong. Be particularly alert for this problem if English is your second language.

Experience

Briana's 18 years of Design and management experience cover a broad arena, including developing UI solutions for Finance, Banking, Business Portals, B2B, ERP, CRM, Manufacturing, and Cultural organizations.

Prior to entering the Internet and Software arenas, Briana was involved in Environmental Graphic Desi

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Two versions of the same portfolio Web text. The one on the right only capitalizes those words that require capitalization.

www.meshsmith.com
www.headsinc.com
Two examples of client-oriented portfolios encourage the viewer to make human contact. Ivan Torres (left) summarizes his specialty on his contact page. So Takahashi (right) briefly lists his capabilities to put his work in context. Neither provides any personal information.

Cover letters

When you send a portfolio or samples, you'll need a cover letter to accompany them. You'll also need to respond if someone sees your website or contacts you from some other connection.

Whether that letter is tangible or virtual, you should compose as much of it as possible in advance—a particularly important step if you are not comfortable with any writing beyond messaging. A cover letter should include a standard salutation, a short reference to who you are and why you are sending your material, and a thank you (in advance) for their interest in your work.

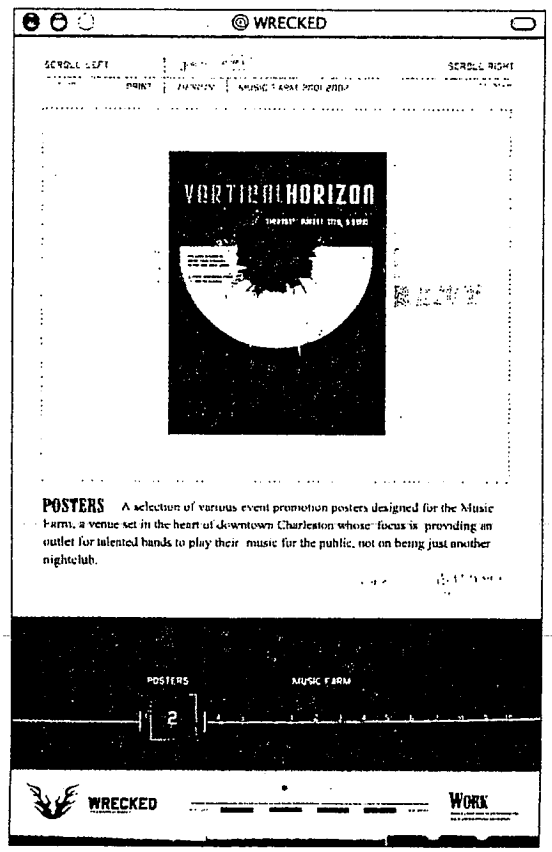
Explaining your creative thinking

Your portfolio doesn't have to include a written commentary on your projects. Many artists and designers prefer to wait until they present their portfolio, particularly if they are more articulate in personal interviews. But some form of explanation can be a valuable asset in your portfolio.

> Copy is one of the many tools that can be effectively used to engage the viewer/consumer. We utilize it whenever possible to create the link between our client's message and their customer's needs.
>
> —Rick Braithwaite

Not all disciplines take the same approach to commenting on their work or adhere to the same standards. Fine artists, for example, write artist statements, which generally speak about a recent body of work and its inspirations. It is a big plus to have a statement that is both personal and well-written, but content is far more important than form. No fine artist has ever had their work rejected because of fuzzy thinking or typographic errors in his or her statement.

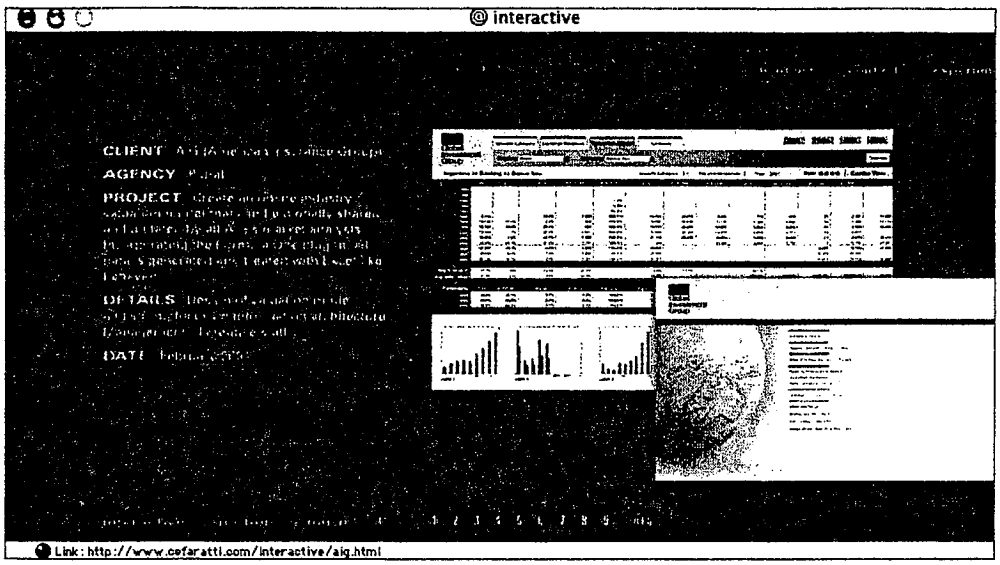
Design professionals are at the opposite end of the spectrum. To fully appreciate the design, it helps to know something about the commission. Many designers include a short descriptive comment about their client's activities and purpose in the work's caption. At its briefest, the comment provides useful context for a design project. At its most expansive, it becomes a case study.



wrecked.nu
Gabe Rubin provides context for this project by telling the viewer something about his client, the Music Farm.

Design brief

Because design work is done in response to a set of requirements and constraints—usually called a design brief—it can be very useful to take the extended captioning one step further by including the brief, so the viewer can better understand the route you traveled. Design briefs can be short and minimal—a capsule overview of the client and their project—or they can be more complete explanations of the project and its criteria. Just remember that in a digital portfolio, "brief" is the operative term.



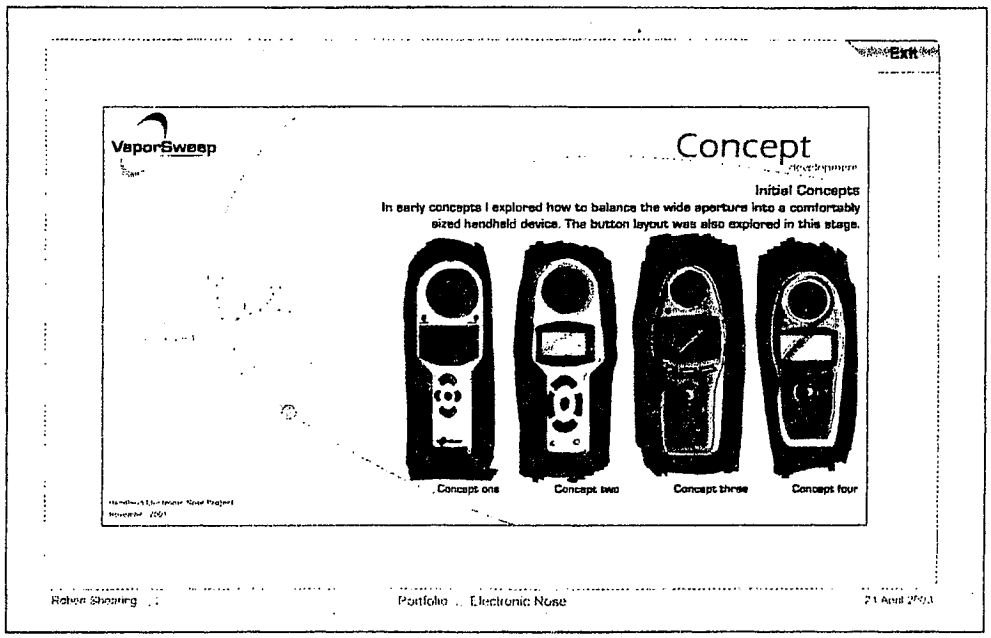
www.cefaratti.com
Mike Cefaratti provides a classic thumbnail design brief for each of his portfolio projects. He lists the client, decribes the design brief under the PROJECT heading, and then explains in the DETAILS section exactly what his role was in the project.

Case study

If you decide to share a full analysis of the design problem and its solution, you are writing a case study. Case studies should not be undertaken lightly because they require good writing and analytical skills. Because they are usually at least a full page of text, you should give the viewer the choice to opt in. Put the case study in its own window or frame or separate it out entirely by making it a downloadable PDF (see BBK Studio's portfolio highlight in Chapter 2, "Adaptation").

Process comments

In disciplines where work evolves in stages, it can be enormously useful not only to show examples of your process, but to annotate your sketches with comments. What led you to your final color choices? What inspired the form for your product design? Here, as in most other writing, avoid duplicating in words information that a viewer can get by looking at the sketches themselves. Process comments can usually be treated like captions—short, direct phrases are good.



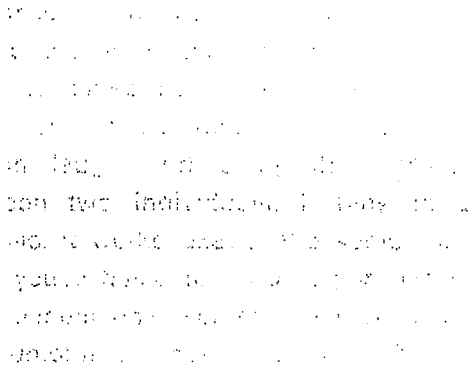
www.rob.id.au
Industrial designer Robert Shearing provides annotations for his process sketches. Although the viewer would have eventually figured out that the button configuration was the most relevant design challenge, Shearing's brief note focuses attention immediately.

Philosophy

Do people sit at your feet and hang on your every word? Do you turn down the opportunity to judge at award ceremonies because you're just too busy advising the UN? I'm betting on "no." If I'm correct, write about your design philosophy, by all means, but leave it off of your portfolio. Your work itself should address how you think and what you believe about your profession. It's not necessary, or advisable, to include it in a digital portfolio. Most people won't read it, and some could be actively put off by it.

Writing to your audience

In Chapter 2, "Adaptation," I emphasized how important it is to know who will be viewing your portfolio and what they'll be looking for. That guiding principle applies to writing your portfolio text. Whether you are writing to CEOs, small design studios, or to a highly-focused niche audience, your vocabulary and style should adapt as needed. Generational slang, niche culture references, and other elements that might make the text hard for your target audience to understand should be stripped away.



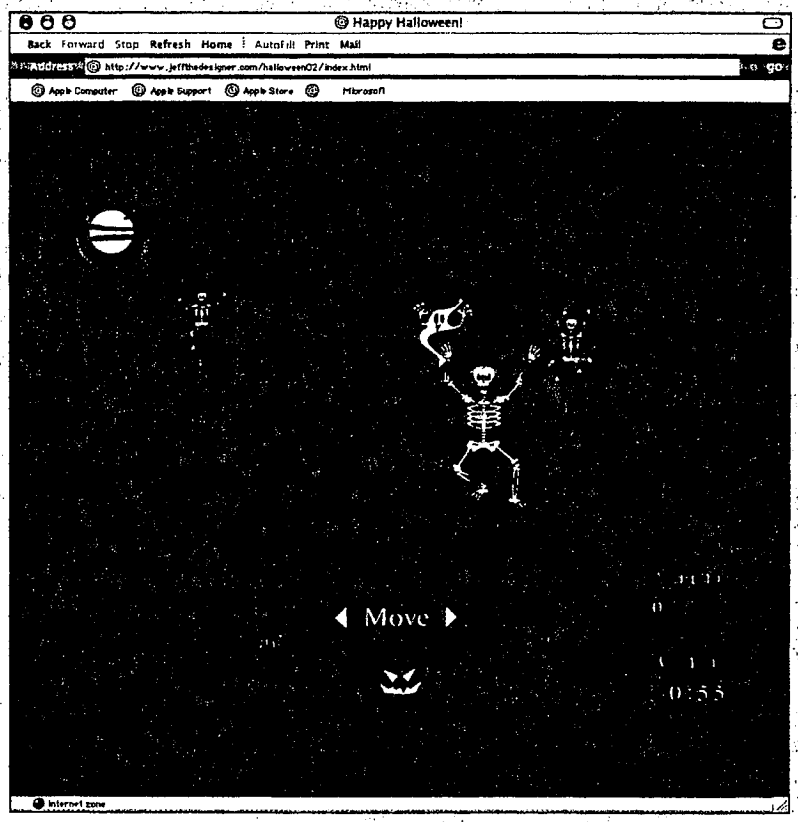
One of the easiest ways to check your tone is to hand your writing to someone who is similar to your audience. For example, if you're young, enlist a mentor or older relative. If you can't find the right reader, go in the other direction and read what your target audience writes. You don't have to imitate it, but you should be sensitive to the differences.

Obviously, the more like your target audience you are, the easier it can be to write appropriate text and the more of your true personality you can expose. But even if you are quite different from your audience, it can be an enormous plus to be able to project a little of yourself into your writing. Light humor (see the "Humor" sidebar), a friendly tone, or a brief anecdote about a project can all help to get the reader on your side.

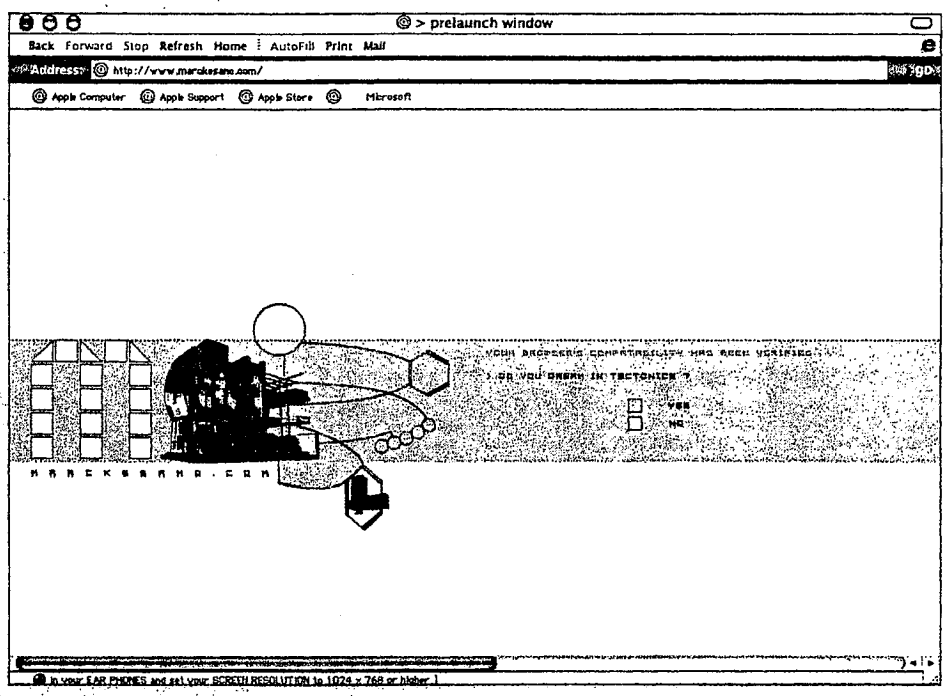
Humor

Nothing is more valuable—or trickier—than adding humor to your portfolio. Humor is a great leveler. If someone makes us laugh, we instinctively warm to them and often to their work.

Unless you are as good at writing as you are visually, the best way to add humor to a portfolio is to show it. A project that includes humor can be valuable in a portfolio filled with serious, restrained work. Don't grab just any funny project, though. Avoid any humor that relies on putting down others. You never know the sex, religion, age, or ethnicity of a potential employer or client. And gross-out humor is just as likely to alienate as amuse.



www.jeffthedesigner.com
Jeff Kaphingst's Halloween game is an example of "safe" humor. The game object is to throw pumpkins at spooky creatures with a catapult. Its portfolio purpose is to showcase his illustration and Flash programming skills.



www.marckesano.com
Architect Patrick Marckesano uses quirky visual and verbal humor to set the tone for his portfolio site. This pair of images is from his site's prelaunch page. If you answer Yes to any one of his series of questions, you get rewarded with an animation and an upbeat musical phrase as his site launches. If you answer no, you get another question and a downbeat tonal sequence.

If you don't have any projects that allow you to show your clever side, you can add some playful elements to your interface. Your portfolio presentation is a perfect oppoortunity to let people peek under the curtain and see what you can do without client constraints.

Most importantly, consider your audience. If you are primarily targeting small studios and other creatives, you can probably be a little looser than if you are attempting to speak to the corporate market. Until you are established and can afford to break the mold, humor in the business world is best left to personal encounters, not incorporated into your personal sales tool.

PORTFOLIO HIGHLIGHT: SANDSTROM DESIGN | GETTING YOUR WORDS-WORTH

www.sandstromdesign.com

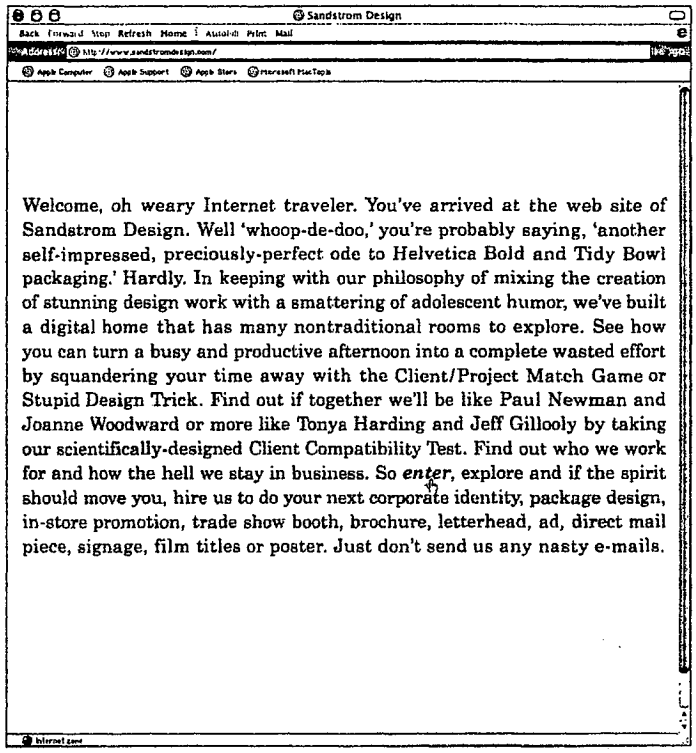
To build a design portfolio on text and humor, you must be one of two things: crazy or very, very good. Rick Braithwaite, the president of Sandstrom Design in Portland, Oregon, is probably both. Fortunately, being slightly crazed in a creative profession can be a selling point. In an environment where so many sites seem to look the same and share the same phrase-book, Sandstrom stands out as a company that really knows how to use the power of the word to sell design. Their portfolio is undeniably unique.

An underlying goal of any portfolio site is to separate from the crowd. Sandstrom Design's site doesn't just cross the street, it packs its bags and moves to the Bermuda triangle, circa 1960. Here, all type has big serifs, all icons are cheesy, and the aesthetic is about as different from today's image complexity as you can get. Yet it is perfectly designed on its own terms: simple, clear, and everything precisely placed.

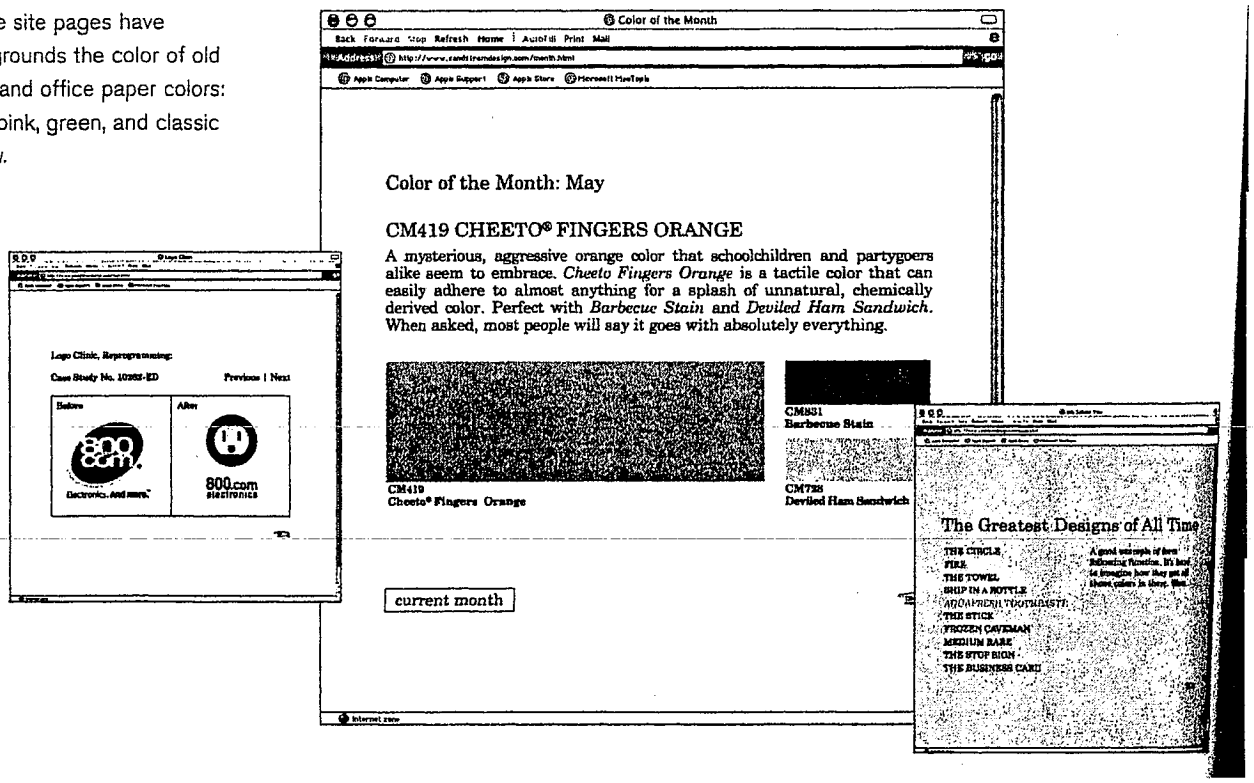
It's also a nicely implemented Flash site. There is no need for preloads, and none of the time you "waste" is spent waiting: the site is extremely fast and responsive. A nice, user-friendly touch: Sandstrom's window can be scaled as you wish, and the type remains legible. Most Flash design sites are programmed to minimize—or eliminate—the visitor's ability to resize because to do so might break the layout.

> Based upon our website, I guess you might think we are seeking clients who like to be abused and waste a few precious hours in useless pursuit of a cheap laugh. Actually, that is correct, but we also are hoping that some of them might be insightful enough to realize that effective communication can be unpredictable, engaging, and bold. We've found that prospects who love the site make for great clients and usually avoid creative shootouts.
>
> —Rick Braithwaite

The Sandstrom opening screen is a simple block of justified serif text on post-it blue. The single interface element: the bold word "enter," which becomes bold italic when moused over and launches the home page when clicked.



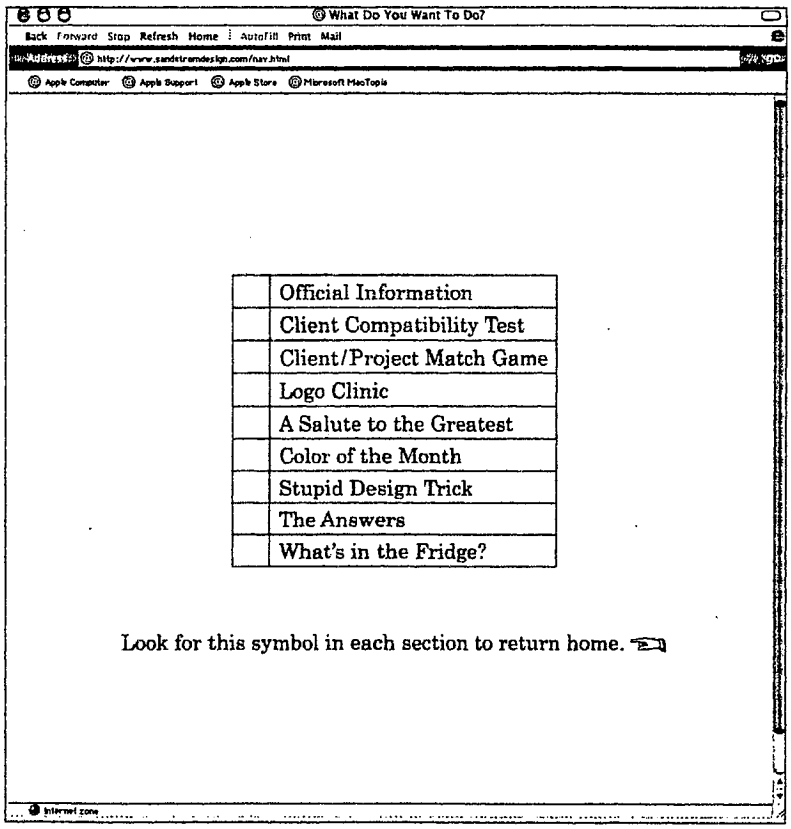
All the site pages have backgrounds the color of old NCR and office paper colors: blue, pink, green, and classic yellow.



Navigation and architecture

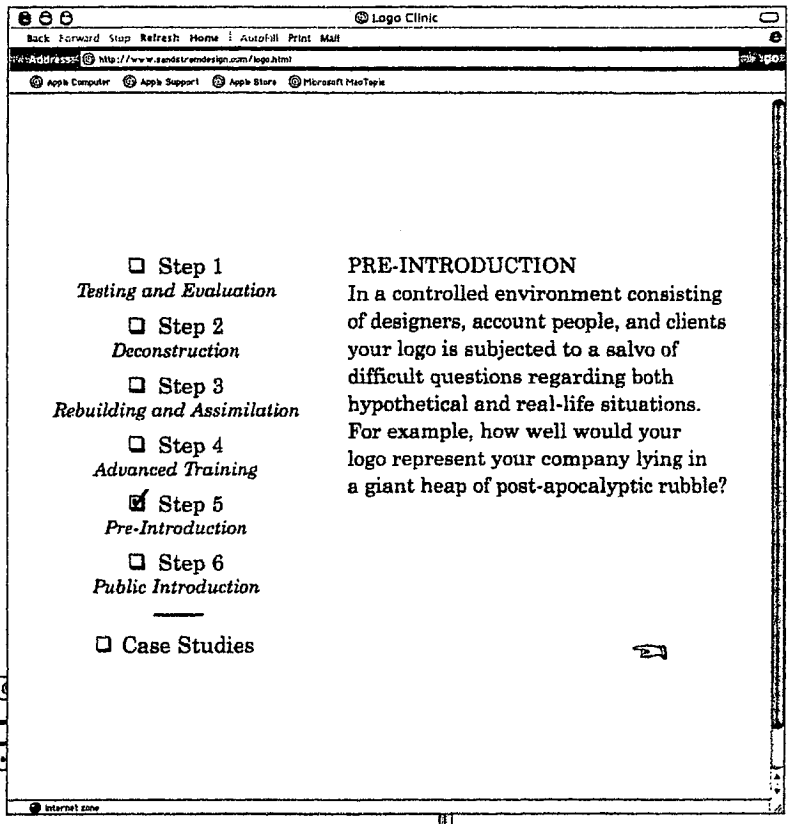
If good design is knowing what to throw out, then Sandstrom Design has the ultimate navigation scheme. The only consistent navigation tool is the back button, a pointing hand. All of the other interactions you have on the site are specifically tied to the themes of each section.

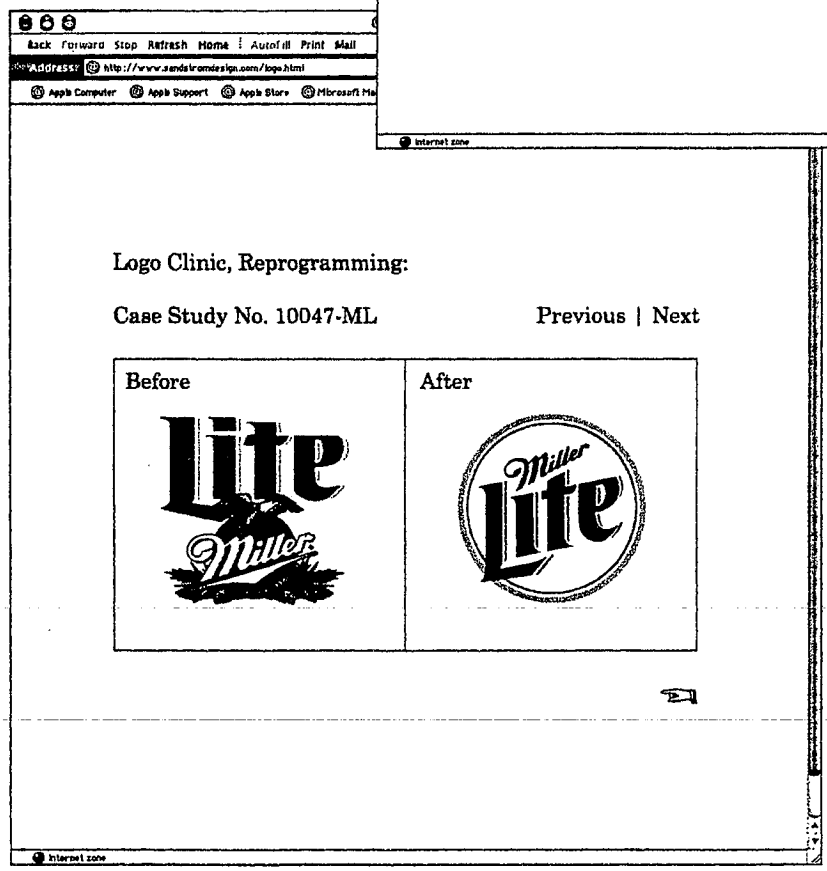
The site architecture is a set of branches, none of which are formally called "portfolio." After you're in a branch, you can sometimes back out to the home page, but you can't hop into a different branch. Each branch must be explored in order—a necessary requirement for a site full of punchlines. The firm makes sure that each visitor sticks to the site like an insect to flypaper.

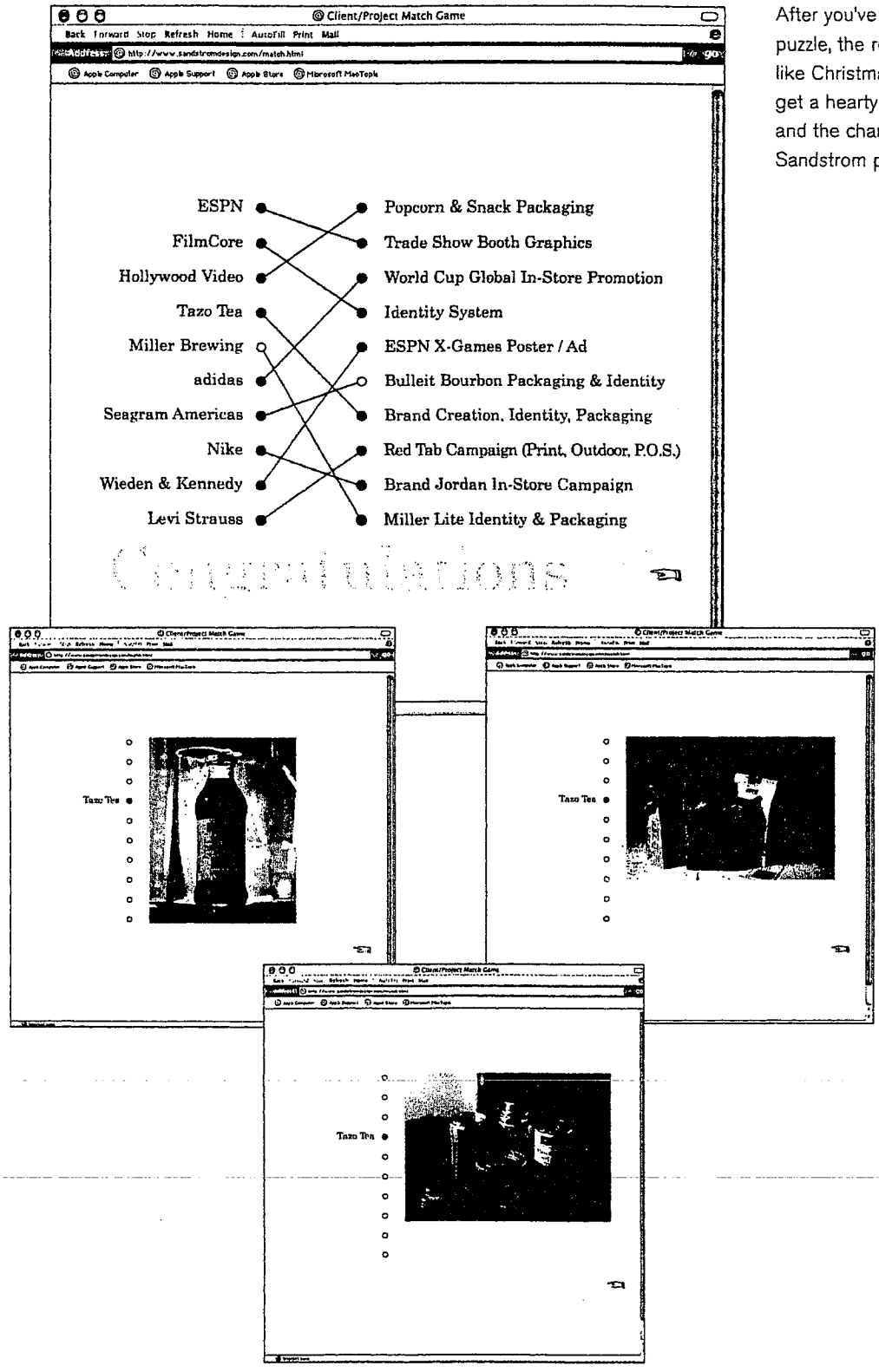


The home page is a real menu, not a computer drop-down list. Roll over boxes next to the options and a checkmark lets you know these are links. To visit any of the site areas, you click the box.

Most of the navigation is based on very simple click-throughs that cycle within an area. These are two examples from the case-study section, titled Logo Clinic. On the left is the logo clinic six-step process. Explanations of each step appear in the right column. On the right is one of the case studies, accessed through a simple Previous|Next click-through sequence.







After you've solved the puzzle, the red dots flash like Christmas bulbs. You get a hearty congratulation and the chance to see some Sandstrom projects.