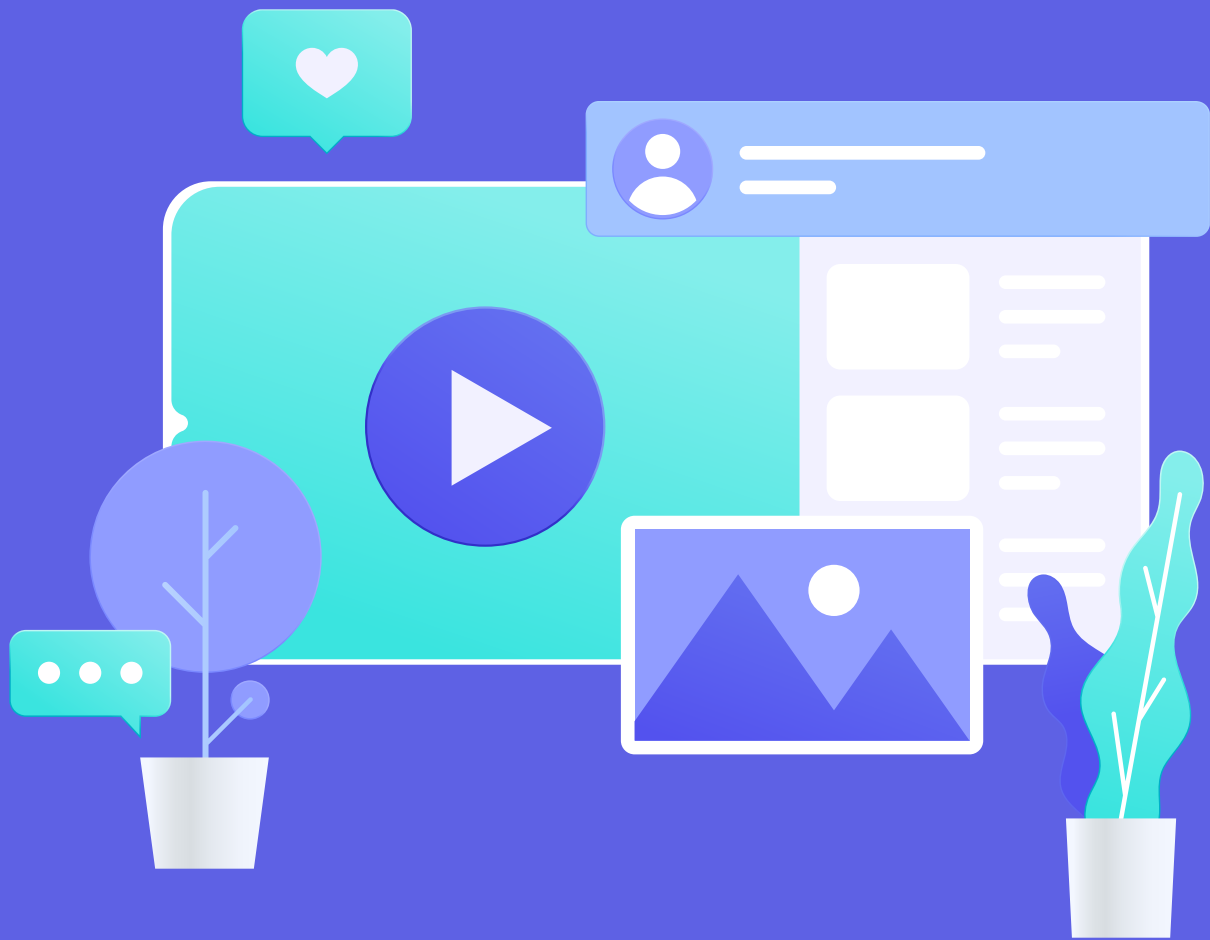# How to Create a Stellar UX/UI Portfolio

EVEN IF YOU HAVE ZERO CLIENTS

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Your portfolio is the most important asset you have as a designer. A stellar portfolio will attract the clients you love working with and getting paid worth your talents and time. But how do you get there?

It's challenging to get 'good-enough' projects, especially when you are starting out. The toughest question people keep asking me:

"What should I do if I don't have enough projects?"

Getting started

If you don't have enough (relevant) projects to include in your portfolio, you have come to the right place. It's challenging to fill up your portfolio with relevant and high-quality projects that will attract your dream customers. Guess what; I didn't start with any big brand names and spectacular projects in my portfolio!

Maybe you are just starting out, and you didn't have clients. Perhaps you were collaborating with other designers, and you cannot show the projects as your own. Or is it because of those vicious NDAs that don't allow you to show the world what awesome project you worked on?

It doesn't matter! This guide will show you multiple options to get kick-ass projects for your portfolio and a complete step-by-step framework for my favorite method for creating a stellar fake project.

How many projects do you need to include in your portfolio?

You need 4-6 projects in your UX/UI portfolio. Don't add more! You can easily start with having just 3 or 4 projects. It's all about quality. Ever heard of Hick's law? To put it simply, it says increasing the number of choices will dramatically increase the amount of time it takes to make a decision. We don't want your clients to get bogged down spending hours with your portfolio, do we?

One big mistake I see people make is forgetting to ask themselves who they want to attract as clients. I've heard many designers complain about how they don't like their clients, who just look at them as pixel-pushers, setting unmanageable deadlines, failing to pay on time, and calling on the weekends. The truth is, it's like fishing. The type of fish you catch depends on where you fish and the bait you use. Switch the bait; you get a different fish. The same goes for clients. Your bait is your portfolio. Change your portfolio, and you'll attract different clients.

Before diving into hunting or creating projects for your UX/UI portfolio, ask yourself a few questions:

◆ Who is my dream client?

◆ What do they look like?

- What industry are they in?

- What type of business do they have?

- What problems and frustrations they have?

- What keeps them up at night?

- What is their biggest desire?

- How can you help them?

- Do you like to work with 1:1 with a client or as part of a team?

- Do you want to work with the founders/CEO directly or product managers, maybe developers?

- What are the characteristics of a superb client for you (e.g., they give me creative freedom, value my work, short feedback time, etc.)?

- What are some red flags you need to avoid (e.g., clients who ask to do workshops for free, busy managers who love to micromanage, etc.)

/ EXPERT TIP:

Fire up a document, give yourself a good 15 minutes, and start writing down answers for these questions. Once you have the answers, begin to reverse-engineer and set up your portfolio to speak directly to these people you described. Getting clear on your dream client will help you move towards working with people you want. After all, you become a designer (or in the making) to impact the world, help people and their businesses, and change lives. Don't stop until you do!

What projects to include in your portfolio?

Let's go through your projects and select the ones to include in your portfolio! If you don't have any (like zero projects), feel free to skip this section and go to **What to Do If You Don't Have Any Good Projects**.

It's all about speaking to your dream client. You need to reverse-engineer and ask yourself: "Which of my projects are super relevant for my dream client?" When clients look at your portfolio, they want to figure out if you can solve their problems and do the job for them.

They have thoughts like...

◆   Did this person do anything similar in the past?

◆   Did he/she solve problems similar to mine?

As you can see, relevancy is huge in this game. If you can show a client you've done something similar in the past, they will think it's a piece of cake working with you.

To decide which projects to include in your portfolio, follow these easy steps:

Collect all your projects

The first step is to sit down, brainstorm, and write down all the projects you've been working on in the past few years. Include everything! Don't erase, don't exclude anything! For now, we just one everything to be listed here.

Then, we will sort and prune that list later! Look at your design files, LinkedIn, previous portfolios, email threads with clients to dig for projects you have worked on.

Step 02

Pair projects with your dream client

Next up, write your dream client's name at the top, then use the list you just created and add all the relevant projects for them. Don't yet prune; include everything that might be relevant!

Step 03

Prune your list!

Now it's time to clean up that list! The goal is to have a maximum of 4-6 projects. Go through each project:

◆ Cross out projects that are not good enough (not high quality, not relevant enough, you get the picture).

◆ Add a mark if a project is only good for 'show off.' That means you've worked on a project with a well-known company, but you don't really want to show the project itself.

◆ Add a mark if an NDA protects a project. If you cannot show anything from the project, cross it out. If you can, but you need to redact, change the name, etc., leave the project in, but add an 'NDA' mark next to the project name.

Evaluate

Did you get the 4-6 projects? Don't worry about NDAs for now. If you can modify the designs, change the logo, redact some information and you are good to go, then don't worry. We will take care of it when putting together the spotlight designs for your portfolio. If you have 4-6 projects for your dream client, you, my friend are ready to move on!

If you don't have the 4-6 projects, don't be sad. If you have at least 3, I recommend you move on. You can still have a small but mighty portfolio that sells you as a professional designer by only showing relevant, super high-quality projects.

If you are still struggling to have enough projects, let's get into the next part: **What to Do If You Don't Have Any Good Projects**.

What to Do If You Don't Have Any Good Projects?

The truth is, when a client is about to hire you, all they want to figure out is if you can do the job for them. As long as you can show a relevant, high-quality, stunning project that when your ICA looks at it, they say 'OMG, this is awesome!' you are golden.

Having a real project from an actual client is social proof for your ICA because somebody has paid you money to work on a similar project. But being able to show the client you thought about the problems they cared about and worked on it (even though it was for free) is just as good for most clients.

Here are your options:

- ◆ Reach out to fellow designers
- ◆ Harness your network
- ◆ Create a fake project

I will briefly describe the first three, then dive deep into the last one, creating a fake project.

Reach out to fellow designers

Designers who juggle multiple clients only have so much time. More established designers need to frequently turn down clients after a certain time because they simply don't have enough time (or don't want to do particular projects). Do you know the next question clients ask if I tell them I cannot take them on as clients? It's "Can you recommend anybody who can do this for me?". It's natural. They already have trust in me, so they want me to help them find my replacement. Building relationships with designers will get you in a position to be referred to a client. How to build a relationship with more established designers?

- ◆ Use your existing network and buy people a coffee or exchange a few messages.
- ◆ Reach on LinkedIn or Dribbble to designers you admire and offer them to help in any way you can. Offer to collaborate. Make sure you don't come across spammy!
- ◆ Nurture your existing connections. Check-in a few times a year to see what they are up to and offer to help.

Harness your network

Many people completely exclude using their existing network because they worry they'll come across as a used car salesman. In reality, what happens is your network does not know you are looking for projects, and you prevent them from working with you. Some tips to get started:

- ◆ Use your social media channels to put the word out. Let your network know you are available for XYZ type of work.

- ◆ Ask people close to you if they can recommend anybody who you can contact for projects.

- ◆ Don't forget to nurture relationships with designers, developers, product managers in your network. These folks can refer you or give you work. Maybe not now, maybe in the future.

Create a bullet-proof fake project

A fake project means you do the project on your own, and no client is giving you instructions or paying you. You might be thinking now, "What's the point, then?". Remember, clients are interested in you serving their needs and solving their problems.

It's better to have a relevant fake project than lots of irrelevant ones from other industries. If I'm looking for a designer for a SAAS product, I cannot tell if you are the right fit when you show me branding work or landing pages you designed for personal trainers. On the other hand, if you can showcase a SAAS project demonstrating all the skills necessary to nail my project, I'm happy to hire you even if nobody paid for it.

What NOT to do

Fake projects are all about being relevant to your dream clients. Many designers choose to redesign projects, such as redesigning Spotify, YouTube, or other well-known products. That's a big mistake!

Unless a video- or music streaming service is super relevant to your customers, don't do it. I'm not saying these products are perfect, but they do have the basics in place. You cannot really demonstrate your skills and expertise (maybe except some visual design skills).

It's a lot better to go with a much less refined product where you can really shine and show the real added value your ideal clients will understand and relate to. Streamlining YouTube's experience? Who cares! Redesigning a crappy but relevant website and showing your client how you could do the same with their site? That's business!

How come up with a kick-ass fake project?

I have an excellent framework to create fake projects that will make a difference for you. The idea is to find a company and a product that would be an ideal client for you. Then redesign their product (or brand) applying your full process treating it like a real client.

This technique is so good because you will work with a real product, solving real problems that your dream clients care about. Taking a real-life product means you don't need to come up with features and problems to solve because they are all laid out for you.

You get to pick what to work on and who do you want to work for. Use this opportunity to create super relevant projects for your portfolio. And the best part? You can actually approach the client once you are done with the project. Let me walk you through step by step how to do it!

Step 01

Pick client type and niche

As a designer, you probably work with many different clients (or you will be). At this point, you need to make a decision. I gave you a bunch of questions about who your ideal customer is in the "How many projects do you need to include in your portfolio" section. Now is the time to be super specific on who do you want to target. Use the following questions as a guide:

◆ What industry do you want to focus on (e.g., healthcare, fintech, real estate, etc.)?

◆ What's the size of the company (e.g., one-person startup, a small startup, medium-sized company, large corporation, etc.).

◆ Where is the business located? (.e.g, country, city if applicable).

◆ What's the annual revenue of the company?

EXAMPLE:

Startup in Germany, 10-15 employees in total. The first version of their mobile app is on the market, they see momentum, but they don't have in-house designers and suffer from UX issues.

HINT:

Since you need to do research in step two and find companies that fit these criteria, you need to ask yourself this question: "Can I take this description and find companies online?" If the answer is no, continue to niche down. If the answer is yes, proceed to step two.

Do your research

The next step is to do a bit of research to find a company that you will do a project for and treat as a client. Don't worry; you do not need to contact the company although when you are finished, I recommend reaching out to the company - who knows, maybe they will hire you!

I want you to go out and find a company that fits your description from step #1, and you could do a fake project for them.

Here is another nugget for you: look for companies with existing (but shitty) products. Redesigning an existing product for a fake project is an excellent choice. That way, you can evaluate the existing product (heuristic evaluation, heck, even do a guerilla user test if you are up for it). You don't need to come up with a complete design brief and a wide range of features to design.

Tools to use:

◆ **Google** - just start typing in industries like 'healthcare startups' or 'edtech companies in Berlin.'

◆ **Crunchbase** - head over to crunchbase.com to browse companies. You can use the filters to look for exciting startups and larger businesses.

◆ **Search for top apps** - if you are hunting for mobile apps, try searching for categories that fit your ICA. For example, 'online booking apps' or 'wine rating apps for iOS.'

Do the project

When you found an exciting company with a good product, it's time for you to shine! Treat the project like you would a real client! Create the user personas, do reviews, or heuristic evaluation - whatever is your design process is, follow it! It's so much easier to take an existing brand or product and redesign it, so be sure to give it a try first!

Reach out to the client

This step is optional, but I highly recommend you do it. Think about it! You just did free work for a company and client you would LOVE to work with. You set your skills in motion, assessed THEIR problems, reviewed, and improved THEIR product. Why should that go unnoticed?

I did this technique in the past, and it landed my clients. Not all the time, but sometimes. And even if we didn't end up working together, when I approached a company was always well-received and thanked for. And guess what, it did work when I was a rookie designer back then.

Some factors will improve your chances of getting hired or get a company as a client. You can look for these traits when doing your research:

◆ Look into if the company is hiring designers (if they have job openings it means they want to satisfy their design needs)

◆ Look for startups with devs and engineers but no designers. Check out their team page, visit their company LinkedIn to see who works there.

◆ Companies with shitty UX who see some traction are often very receptive to working with designers. They already built something that worked, and at this point, they usually start to see the issues caused by the lack of UX and design resources.

Back to the outreach! Try to look for a contact for the company. You can go after the founders/CEO or head of something at a larger company. Send them an email introducing yourself briefly and letting them know that you redesigned their product, and if they are interested, you would be happy to get on a call to present some ideas.

It's best to send them some teasers but don't reveal all your cards just yet! Send them a quick walkthrough video of the work you did or a few page PDF. That way, you can hook their interest and avoid being looked at as every other salesperson. Try to get them on a call with you. Relax, you have something valuable they will be interested to see! There is no way things can go wrong for you since you did all this for free! During the call, present your ideas and let them know that you are open to opportunities. In some cases, you might win clients this way. In other cases, you win good connections who might refer you to new clients or circle back to you when they are ready to work with you.

Where do we go from here?

To learn more about how to become a top-tier product designer and grow your freelance business, check out my podcast:

https://uxkitchenshow.com