Show Your SAS® Off:
Personal Branding and Your Online Portfolio

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ABSTRACT

"Visibility creates opportunities."

The word "online portfolio", for most people, brings to mind collections of stunning photographs and graphic design; though utilization of this tool should not stop there. Any and all creative professionals can and should have an online portfolio. The ferocity at which we present and attend these user groups attests to the fact that portfolios would flourish within our line of work. Are white papers not but showcases of our creative programming solutions? How many of us keep copies of our best coding snidbits tucked away in a file on the computer? Would it not serve us best to showcase these to our peers? After all visibility creates opportunities. Opportunities that include new job leads, collaborations, mentorship, and self-learning. Also it's simple. In today's day and age, sites such as Weebly and Wordpress can have you published within an hour- all you need is content and a little inspiration. This paper hopes to provide that inspiration by giving examples of successful online programming portfolios and tips on how to create your own.

SETTING UP YOUR SITE

"Create your own career, instead of letting your company do it for you."

Your website, ideally at yourfullname.com, is likely the first thing that people will see when they Google your name. This gives you full control of the message you want to send. You can use that control to shape your career by selecting a portfolio that highlights your interests. As your site becomes ingrained (through LinkedIn, your resume, and internet searches), people will begin to associate you with the topics in your portfolio, thus directing your career to the roles you enjoy. This doesn't mean your portfolio can not be diverse; include anything you like within it, but do pay attention to the topics you have emphasized. When your site is done, your personal brand, interests, and specialties should be obvious to the reader. First step to setting up your site is to decide on a few things that will influence that message:

1) Is your site all work and no play? Would you like to include some of your hobbies as well?
2) Is the primary goal of your site to get jobs, educate others, or is it your personal code haven?
3) What mood do you want? Airy, Serious, Bright, Tech, so on...

All of the above choices should correlate with your personal brand. If you haven't decided on a personal brand yet, your choices should help you begin to form one. After answering the questions above, you should have a general idea of how your website will feel. With that impression in mind, it is time to start building your site.

STEP 1) GET A SITE

To pick a website host, I'd recommend googling "free personal website" and starting there. You should spend some time reading reviews, browsing the templates, and ultimately pick the site that has all the features you'd like. Most free versions will have their name in your web address (for example my site is

bharlan.weebly.com) with an option to purchase a domain without their name. Under "References", I've included an article from USA Today that reviews three very good options: Weebly.com, Jimdo.com, and Wordpress.com. These sites have an easy point and click interface that will help you build your site.
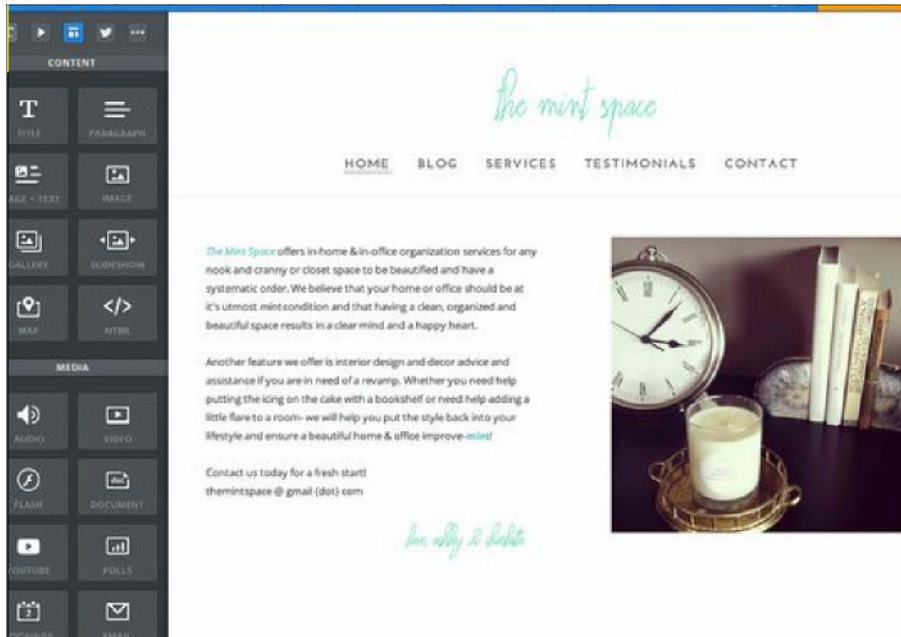

DISPLAY 1. Screenshot of Weebly's website builder (Photo: Jennifer Jolly for USA TODAY)

STEP 2) SELECT A TEMPLATE

Since your website will be mostly programming, it is important to pick a template that is not photo heavy, has clear page tabs, and that will look good with SAS code. The color scheme you choose should reflect the mood you chose earlier. DISPLAY 2 shows two templates that would work well as a programming portfolio; both of them are simple with clear navigation. While DISPLAY 3 illustrates templates that are too busy and photo focused for a programming portfolio.
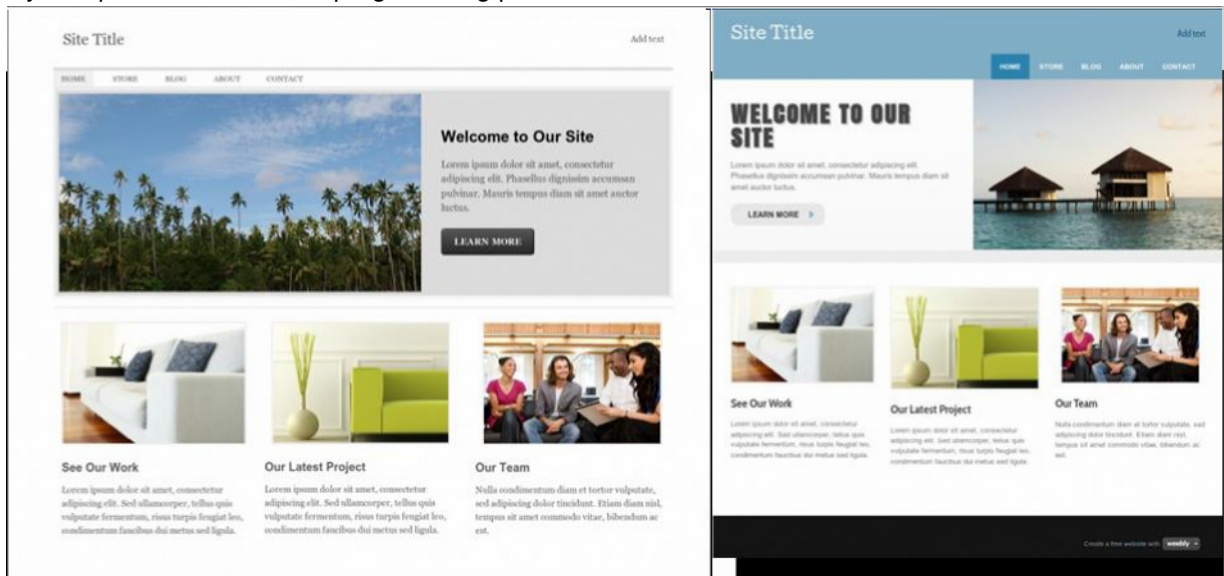
DISPLAY 2. Good template choices- simple with clear navigation
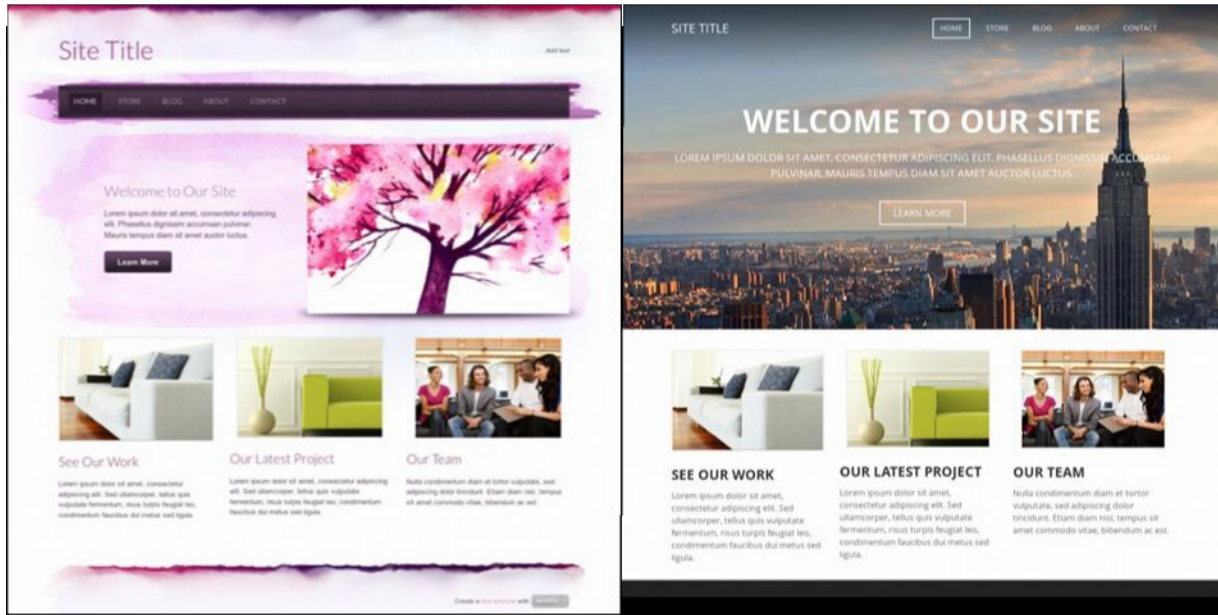
DISPLAY 3. Poor templates choices- too busy and photo heavy for a portfolio

STEP 3) MAKE PAGES

The pages you create for your site will depend on what you want your site to include and the goal of your website. All sites should include a Home Page and a Portfolio. If your site's goal is to get job offers, you should consider adding a Resume and Contact page. If you have presented before you should add a Papers page. And if you would like to use your site as an educational tool, you can add a Resources page that includes links to useful websites and papers. Lastly if you have decided to include things outside of programming on your site, be sure to add a page for those topics.

In the end your pages may look something like this:
1) Home
2) Portfolio
3) My Papers
4) Resources
5) DIY Projects
6) R e s u m e
7) Contact Me

ADDING CONTENT

"You do not really understand something unless you can explain it to your grandmother."

If you are considering an online portfolio, you likely have already started accumulating your best code in one place. Begin by gathering this code and grouping it into categories. It's okay if some of your code is basic and short. They can be put on a "quick tips" page for your personal reference. Outside of quick tips, you should end up with no more than five main themes among your programs. If you have found more than five themes, you should consider consolidating them. Don't be afraid this will limit you; it's possible to demonstrate a wide range of skills while still focusing on a few core topics. By limiting your main topics, you will be able to communicate your specialty to your audience.

PREPPING CONTENT

Once you have selected which programs will grace your site, some prep work is needed before that code is ready for the public. I've included a check list below of five good practices that should be done before publishing code to your site:

1) Simplify

Oftentimes the code we are trying to share is part of a much bigger project. Before uploading the code, try to remove as much non critical information as possible. Extra lines only distract the reader from the technique you are trying to demonstrate. You should not show the code in pieces, for instance, removing the `PROC SQL; CREATE TABLE` verbiage. The skill level of your audience is unknown, and they may not understand where the code segment should belong within the syntax.

2) Generalize

The more you have simplified your program, the easier generalizing it will be. In this step, you should remove any of your company's proprietary information and any PII (personally identifiable information). Rename variables that may not be easily understood; for example, a timestamp named "Sub_TS" is not quickly understood as a date field and may confuse your audience.

3) Comment

Ideally you should have a comment before every DATA step or PROC. A novice programmer should be able, at the very least, read through your comments and understand the steps that were taken, regardless of understanding the syntax.

4) Test

Test! Test! Test! This is especially important after you have generalized your code - you may have made a mistake renaming fields, when you test the program you may catch these errors.

5) Take a picture

Whenever possible add screenshots of the input, output, and steps. This is extremely helpful in helping your audience understand the steps. Remember, the image should only contain relevant fields and exclude any confidential data.

DISPLAYING CONTENT

Deciding how to display your portfolio may be the most difficult part of creating your site. The challenge is writing descriptions without being wordy and organizing items so they can be found quickly. In DISPLAYS 4-6, I've included three different examples of how programmers have tackled this task.

DISPLAY 4 illustrates how an applications developer, Grokcode.com, displayed his programs in "blocks". Each program block includes an image and description. He did this without his programs necessarily having visual output. For one, he just added a screenshot of the code and in another he made a graphic of the program's name. What's nice about this technique is that it gives ample space for a description without the page becoming overly wordy. The downside is that it's space consuming and there is even more prep for your programs due to finding a main image and writing a lengthy description.

DISPLAY 4. Screenshot of Grokcode.com's Coding Portfolio http://grokcode.com/programmer-portfolio/

On the complete opposite end of the spectrum, LesterChan.net (DISPLAY 5) lists his programs with mere three word descriptions. His use of groups and subgroups to categorize his programs provides the reader with more explanation of the program's function. The advantage of this method is that it allows you to quickly add many programs to your site. The downside is that no program stands out more than others and the lack of information and the plain appearance may lose the reader's interest.
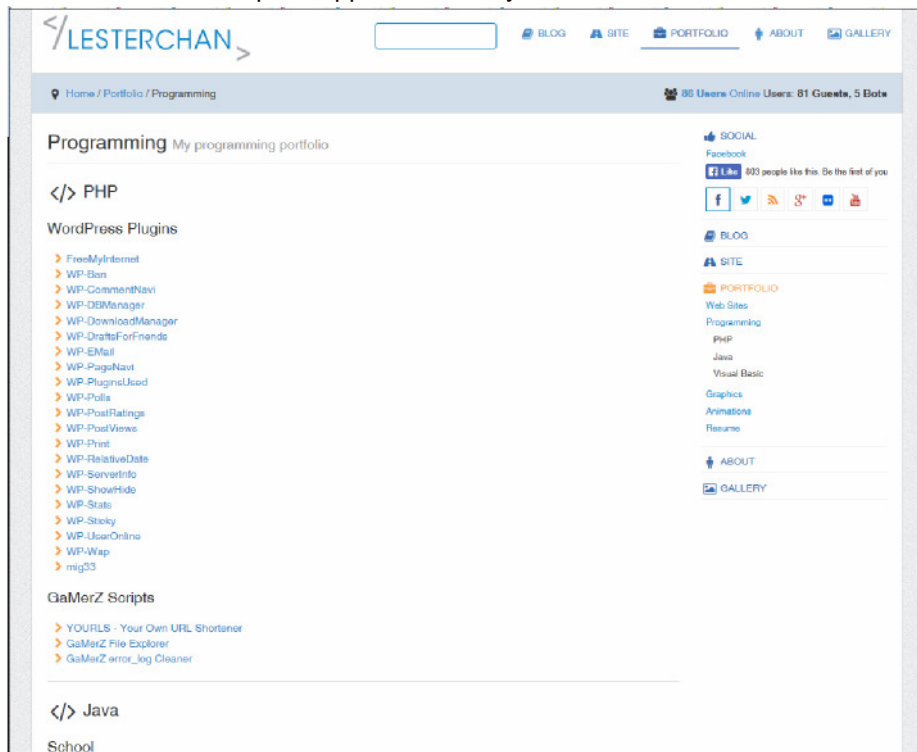
DISPLAY 5. Screenshot of LesterChan.net's online portfolio http://lesterchan.net/portfolio/programming/

My own portfolio in DISPLAY 6 illustrates a middle ground between the two previous examples. In addition to listing programs within main groups, a short description is added beneath program titles that may need further explanation. To prevent a sea of text, funny programming memes have been added throughout the page. Although like Grokcode.com, images of some programs could have been used instead to highlight the more paramount programs.
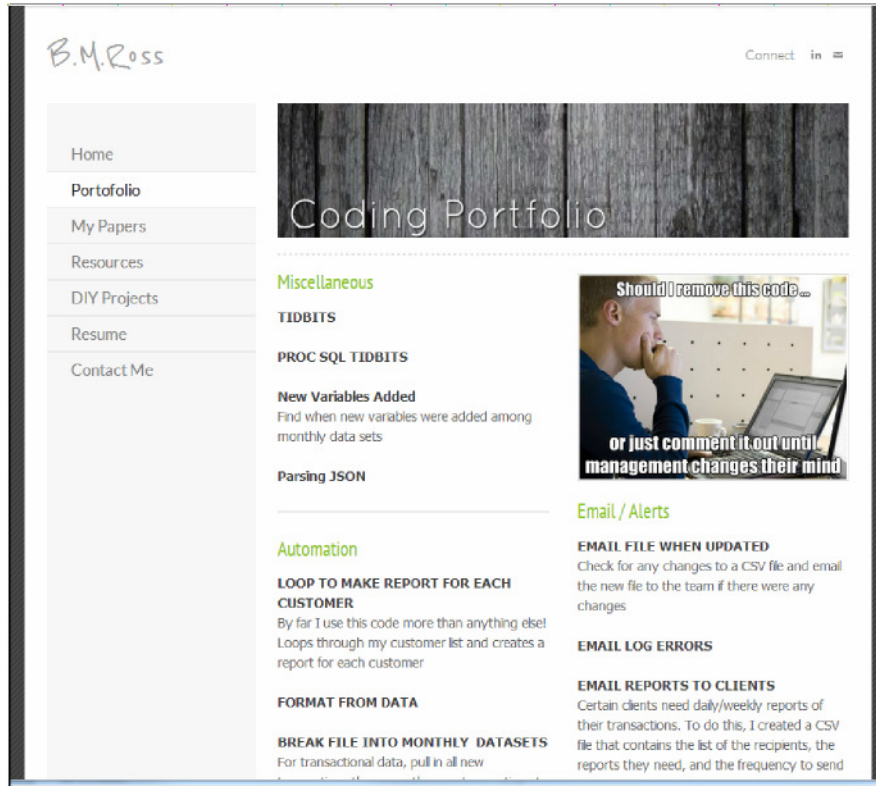
DISPLAY 6. Screenshot of bharlan.weebly.com portfolio, http://bharlan.weebly.com/portofolio.html

Likely you will play around with several methods of displaying your online portfolio before settling on the one that best fits your content and goals. Whatever that end result may be, remember that it should be easy to navigate and clearly communicate to your audience what you do best.

PERSONAL BRANDING

"If you want to be known for everything, you'll be known for nothing."

Creating an online portfolio without considering your personal brand could do more harm than good for your career. Your site will become associated with you as it becomes embedded in your online presence; and you need to make sure it reflects the message you are sending through other means (LinkedIn, Facebook, etc). When people see inconsistencies they will begin to doubt what was originally perceived about you, and ultimately you may miss out on an opportunity because of conflicting messages. Adhering to a personal brand can prevent this by clearly communicating your key traits reinforcing your image. As well, an honest personal brand will help navigate you towards the right opportunities. People who are seeking your skill set and personality will be drawn towards you while incompatible matches are put off. Also understanding your personal brand will make it easier for you to decide what to share online.

There is no shortage of articles about creating your personal brand floating around the internet. Two great methods I used and will describe in more detail were choosing key pillars and creating a brand statement. High level summaries of these methods are described below, but for more information see the Jorgensundberg.net and PickTheBrain.com articles listed under "References".

CHOOSE PILLARS FOR YOUR BRAND

A successful brand is based on a few good qualities that allow viewers to connect and remember the product. Apple for an instance has a diverse array of tech gadgets, but they unite everything by branding themselves as *cutting-edge, stylish, high-end,* and *virus-free.* To start defining your personal brand, you need to decide on a handful of qualities about yourself that you want to be known for. Make a list and rank them; keeping your top 4-5 things. You don't want to have too many items. The more precise your brand the easier it will be for others (and yourself) to remember it.

Take for example a pillars list of: *current, transparent, up-for-it, quick,* and *organized.* Recognizing current as a number one priority within their personal brand, that person should make it a point to share new information on their industry and programming. To increase transparency and appearing more open, they may add personal information on their site, such as photos highlighting hobbies and current projects. Overall understanding these personal brand pillars will help maintain their message. Before adding any new content online, a quick mental check can be done to ensure what they are posting upholds their brand. Adding a status update, for example, fussing about IT upgrading Windows XP on their computer would not reinforce *current* to their audience.

CREATE A BRAND STATEMENT

It is also helpful to create a personal brand statement that clarifies exactly what you do, how you do it, and for whom. How many times have you been asked what you do and mutter some stuff about programming and data, or simply state your job title? Do you feel like people really understand what you do or is it mere pleasantries? Having a personal brand statement prepared will help you leave a lasting impression on others that may lead to opportunities in the future.

Your personal brand statement should be 1-2 sentences answering these three questions:

1) What problem do you solve?
2) How do you do it uniquely?
3) For whom?

To illustrate this, instead of simply saying "John is a credit and data analyst", it is much better to say "John minimizes lender's (*who)* losses by identifying trends in their data (*how)-* especially for loans issued to high-risk subprime consumers (*unique*)*."* You can see how the personal brand statement is much more memorable, explanatory, and has a nice punch. Throw that around at your next networking event and save yourself from the blank stares that follow the words "statistician", "SAS programmer", and "data analyst".

APPLY YOUR BRAND OFFLINE AND ONLINE

To get the most out of a personal brand, you need to promote it every opportunity you can. The quickest place to do this is online since that's the area you have the most control over. Does your social media profile and online portfolio echo your personal pillars? What kind of opportunities does your online

portfolio attract? Is it clear what makes you unique? Check for consistency as well- Does your LinkedIn profile match your website's resume page? This unified message from your personal brand is all part of actively shaping your career and being more memorable.

This consistency cannot stop with the web. Networking and reputation play a huge role in our careers whether we are aware of it or not. How many times have you given reviews for other people through casual conversation? This is why it is important to bring your brand offline as well. Do you project your brand while at work, conferences, or out in general? You should be aware at all times how your clothes and interactions might be giving off conflicting messages. For example, it would be very inconsistent to carry around an old flip phone when your top priority is for others to view you as current. The more honest you were when developing your personal brand, the easier it will be to be consistent offline.

CONCLUSION

My online portfolio started as a fun side project sometime after grad school after I lost the notebook that housed all my good SAS programs. To prevent losing it all again, I decided to make a site and start posting it all on the World Wide Web. Now, my site has become a haven for all my favorite programs, publishing my SUG papers and presentations, and showing off my dynamite craft projects.

Personal branding awareness came after I started hearing from people who viewed my site. Honestly, I was taken back just hearing anyone actually looked at. I started to wonder what people thought and if I was projecting the right message. As a result I did a complete overhaul and got the site at a level that I was proud to promote. Now my resume hyperlinks to it, so potential employers can see what kind of programming I am capable of. I can tell you it has definitely been my wow factor and the personal branding I incorporated has landed me in roles better suited for me.

With the tools available today, I would encourage every professional to spend the time to putting together an online portfolio. Maintaining such a site only takes a few minutes a month and adding new content is as quick as half an hour. And hopefully after reading this paper, you have that little inspiration to get started.

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