The Photographer’s Guide to Creating an Online Portfolio

By Jim Hamel

When it is time to step it up . . .

Many times it happens that someone gets started with photography and starts taking some good pictures. They get some positive comments and discover they have a knack for this thing. They like getting out and photographing landscapes and nature. But of course they also take pictures of their family. Because members of their family live out of town, they set up a Flickr page to show them all the pictures.

But others start occasionally looking at the pictures as well. They keep posting the outdoor pictures and the family pictures to the site, and after a while they have a bunch of different types of pictures on there.

After a while, they decide that they want to step up the display and make it look more professional. The answer to this problem is almost always to add a separate portfolio site. Or, if you don’t have any online presence, it is time to get started with one.

The Modern Photography Portfolio

The online portfolio site is one of the best aspects of the modern digital age of photography. With no coding skills and with very little money, you can still have a professional looking photography website. In minutes.

Recent advances in internet technology have made setting up a site a very simple “drag and drop” experience. Most sites have tons of templates you can start with. From there you can add your own customization if you would like. You don’t need separate hosting. You just sign up, design your site, and start adding pictures. You instantly have a world-wide audience.

If you are like me, you find this amazing. Previous generations had nothing like it. Future generations will yawn at all this, but for us this is nothing short of awesome.

The Best Site for You

You will find, however, that there are a dizzying number of places vying to be your provider of online services. In this guide I will discuss 8 of them (and there are more). But even among the providers, there are usually 3 different plans at various price points with different features. With all these choices and plans, you may not even know where to start.

You will find comparisons of online portfolio sites out there on the web. So why am I writing this one? First of all, I believe this is, by far, the most comprehensive comparison of online portfolio sites that exists. Candidly, I think the comparisons that exist are inadequate.
Further, other comparisons make no effort at tailoring the comparisons to the audience. They are trying to compare all plans for all people. No differentiation between the professional photographer with 25 years of experience and the person just starting out.

So, in addition to trying to make this guide much more comprehensive than anything else that exists, I am writing this guide for a discrete person. That person is what I believe to be the person that is in the market for an online portfolio site for the first time. Based on my experience and communications with subscribers of Outdoor Photo Academy, here is what that person looks like:

- you are a photographer with no serious online presence (perhaps a Flickr account and pictures on social media);
- you want a professional looking website;
- you want your own domain;
- you plan to start out by posting a few galleries and build from there;
- you plan to keep adding images, and you might have up to 300 photos on the website in the next few years;
- you want at least a moderate degree of customization in your site (without having to code);
- you would like to sell prints or other items at some point, but you have no real need for commerce at this time;
- you don’t want to spend a fortune on this project.

Hopefully that person looks something like you. But if not, I hope that this guide helps you understand all the options out there so you can make sure you are in the right place. In any case, come along and let’s get started looking at how to put together an online portfolio.
Our first move is to compare the pricing of the various providers. But it is not so easy as to just set forth the price for each provider. They each have different plans with different features. In some cases the basic plan will meet our needs. In others, we need to step up to a intermediate plan. How do we make sure we are comparing apples to apples?

As mentioned previously, I have a target audience in mind for this guide. That allows me to set parameters on what is needed. So the price I term “Your Cost” below for each of these providers is the one that gets us: (i) our own domain; (ii) sufficient storage; and (iii) a template and moderate degree of customization.

So, without further ado, here are the online providers we will be looking at, along with their pricing.

**Folio HD**
- Plans:
  - Turnkey: $239
  - Premium: $349
  - Pro: $695
- Your Cost: $239

**Folio Link**
- Plans:
  - Starter: $0
  - Power: $108
  - Professional: $204
- Your Cost: $108

**Orosso**
- Plans:
  - Starter: $0
  - Premium: $108
  - Pro: $204
- Your Cost: $348

**Pixpa**
- Plans:
  - Lite: $48
  - Starter: $108
  - Pro: $204
- Your Cost: $48

The remaining plans are set forth on the next page.
Meet the Providers: **Pricing** (pt. 2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Photoshelter</th>
<th>SmugMug</th>
<th>Squarespace</th>
<th>Zenfolio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Plans:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Plans:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Plans:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Plans:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Basic: $109</td>
<td>- Basic: $40</td>
<td>- Personal: $96</td>
<td>- Basic Plus: $30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Standard: $329</td>
<td>- Power: $60</td>
<td>- Professional: $192</td>
<td>- Unlimited: $60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Pro: $549</td>
<td>- Portfolio: $150</td>
<td>- Business: $288</td>
<td>- Premium: $140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Your Cost:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Your Cost:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Your Cost:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Your Cost:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$329</td>
<td>$60</td>
<td>$96</td>
<td>$60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Conclusions on Pricing**

So the prices for available plans run anywhere from $0 to $695. Looking just at plans that would work for you, the range of costs would be between $48 and $348.

Based on this pricing, we can go ahead and eliminate some of these options right away. Some of these options are several times as much money per year as others. When I know that the lower priced options are really high quality (and I do, and I will show you that in a bit), there is just no sense paying more. In fact, I'm just going to put a $100/year cap on this operation. And so, based on that, we will go ahead and eliminate Foliolink, FolioHD, Orosso, and Photoshelter from further consideration.

So, based on price alone, we are down to 4 contenders - **Pixpa**, **SmugMug**, **Squarespace**, and **Zenfolio**. We will take a closer look at them next.
Your number one concern when creating your portfolio site should be how good the page looks and how it shows off your pictures. So that is what we will look at now. To evaluate that, we need to take a look at the available themes and templates offered by each provider, and then look at the degree of customization available.

Doing that necessarily contains a certain subjective element. I am not going to attempt to tell you which has the best templates or options. But I can give you things like the number of options, the overall quality of different options, and some information on the degree of customization available.

When talking about customization, think in terms of “drag and drop” or other similar functionality. Some of these services allow you to dig into the code, but you don’t want to get involved that, even if you know how. It inevitably makes everything more complicated and it becomes more difficult to add pictures and move them around.

So now let’s compare the actual sites. I’m going to talk about the 4 sites I think have reasonable prices, but the others have excellent designs too.

### 4 Stars

**Themes**

Pixpa offers 11 theme options for you to start with. They offer previews of each so you can look around a bit. They offer many, many examples, but they are not tied directly to the theme.

**Customization**

Pixpa has a high degree of customization available. It is intuitive and largely done through “drag and drop.”

### 4 Stars

**Themes**

Smugmug has 24 theme options available, each targeted toward photographers. Smugmug recently updated their look, and their themes are modern and look great.

**Customization**

Smugmug offers a very good degree of customization. There are tons of options for the front page, and a nice degree of customization available for the actual gallery pages.

### 5 Stars

**Themes**

Squarespace has 32 theme options available. Some of those are geared to businesses, but their themes are outstanding. They give you a lot of information about each theme, and even show you examples of these themes being used by others.

**Customization**

Squarespace probably has the most customization available of any of these services. They do a good job of making it intuitive as well.

### 4 Stars

**Themes**

Zenfolio has 8 theme options available for you to start with. Each of them is really nice. In addition, Zenfolio shows many customer examples, including gallery pages from several.

**Customization**

Zenfolio has a theme designer with a high degree of customization available. It is intuitive and largely done through “point and click” tools.
# Meet the Providers: Functionality

Like I said, the most important part of the website is how it looks and how it shows off your pictures. But that doesn't mean other things aren't important too. Here are some other aspects of the providers of portfolio websites for you to consider and compare:

## Storage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Provider</th>
<th>Star Rating</th>
<th>Feature Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>pixpa</td>
<td>1 Star</td>
<td>Does not keep originals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SmugMug</td>
<td>4 Stars</td>
<td>Unlimited files up to 50 MB.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Squarespace</td>
<td>3 Stars</td>
<td>Unlimited files up to 20 MB.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zenfolio</td>
<td>4 Stars</td>
<td>Unlimited files up to 36 MB.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Mobile

Each offers mobile versions of your website.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Provider</th>
<th>Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 Stars</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Help

You will have questions and need help.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Provider</th>
<th>Star Rating</th>
<th>Feature Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 Stars</td>
<td>Nice online Help Center Service during business hrs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 Stars</td>
<td>Great online Help Center Reach a person 24/7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 Stars</td>
<td>Great Knowledge Base Videos and a Forum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4 Stars</td>
<td>Robust Support Center</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Blogging

Some make it easier than others to add a blog.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Provider</th>
<th>Star Rating</th>
<th>Feature Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4 Stars</td>
<td>Products handled through Fotomoto.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 Stars</td>
<td>Prints done through lab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4 Stars</td>
<td>You can sell wide variety of services, downloads, and products.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 Stars</td>
<td>You can have them handle, you can self-fulfill, and sell digital products.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Choosing a Provider: Recommendation

There is no reason why you should not be 100% satisfied with your provider of your online portfolio.

That is partly because they are each of such high quality. But in addition, they each offer a 14 day free trial. You don't even have to give them a credit card, so there is no risk here. You can try them out and make sure that you can make the portfolio website that is exactly what you want.

So I am not going to declare a “winner” or give you one recommendation. Instead, I’m going to recommend you proceed as follows:

1. Check out all four of Pixpa, Smugmug, Squarespace, and Zenfolio.
2. Take the free trial of whichever one(s) you like best.
3. After 14 days, pull the trigger on the one you like best.

My Approach

Perhaps the best way to tell answer the question of which online portfolio service to go with is to tell you how I have approached it for myself.

Long ago, I checked all the available options for online photography portfolios and went with SmugMug. This was several years ago, and what you see in the SmugMug of today is a lot better than what was available then, but they were the best available at that time. I have never regretted that decision. However, a few years ago, I found I was not able to do what I wanted to customize my portfolio site. I also noticed that others, particularly Squarespace, were offering much better options. I went so far as to do the 14-day free trial with Squarespace, and was impressed. However, at about that same time, Smugmug drastically overhauled its service, and it was a lot better. I was able to update my Smugmug site and have been happy with it ever since.

So, personally, I like Smugmug and Squarespace the best. But I would not steer you away from any of these options. Again, take the 14-day trial with one or more of them, and get started.
Designing a Site: Choosing a Theme

Now that you have chosen your online portfolio service, it is time to start creating your website. This part can be really fun, so don't get bogged down - enjoy it!

Two Basic Ways to Design

The first thing you will do is choose a theme. Any one of the portfolio services we have covered in this guide offer several themes to get you started. Before you dive into that, I recommend you go look at the photography websites of your favorite photographers. See what you like on their sites (and what you don't). That will give you some ideas and help clarify what you want.

When it comes to actually choosing a theme, there are two general approaches:

1. Find a theme that suits your purposes and just go with it, making tweaks as you go, or
2. Design your website on paper first, and then set about building it.

Pick and Go

If there is a theme that closely matches what you want to do, then start with that. Or if you don't really know what you want, just pick a theme and go with it. It will be the easiest for you. You will be tweaking it a lot, so it will become your own. In any event, you can change later.

Design on Paper

If you have a particular scheme or idea in mind, then go ahead and map it out on paper. Once you have done so, choose a theme that looks reasonably close, mindful that you will make a lot of changes to it. Then set about building it. If you go this route, I would peruse some tutorials offered by your service, as you might end up performing major surgery on your site.
The first thing to create, and arguably the most important part of the website, is your front page. This is obviously the first thing people see upon arriving at your site. You need to make a quick impression or it will be the only thing that they see! It will also contain the navigation to get to the other parts of your site. Put the most thought of any page into the front page. In fact, you might put as much thought into the front page as you do the rest of the site combined.

There are two general ways to go about designing a front page. Either way it will center around your images. They are:

1. If you have a particular “signature image” that stands out from the rest of your work, or that you are known for, then you might use it on your front page. Even if you don’t have such an image, you might want to go through your best images and see if one stands out. This allows you to maximize the size of the image, which adds impact to it.
2. Others use themes with multiple images on the front page. While this does not give the viewer one large image, it does provide a more representative sample of your work. You can also link your galleries up to these images to add navigation.

I personally do not have one particular signature image. However, I do not like designs with a bunch of small pictures. I feel that lacks dramatic effect that is needed for the front page. So I created a design for my page that includes a slideshow of large images. In that way I get the benefit of the large dramatic image, but I’m not locked into just one image. Both Squarespace and SmugMug support the slideshow functionality.
Designing a Site: Navigation

The next thing to think about is your site navigation.

Navigation is typically done with a menu that runs along the top of the front page, or a long one side of the front page. No matter which provider you use, they will have tools for simply creating and linking to pages to create navigation.

**Keep it simple**

The key to navigation is to keep it as simple as possible. Most internet experts recommend you limit the number of choices to three or four, and never go with more than five. My site is actually a little bit heavy with 5 options.

**Drop-downs**

You can also include drop-down menus in your navigation. You don’t necessarily need them though, and some people actually don’t like them. As shown to the right, I set up my site so that if you hover over Galleries it will show a list. If you just click on Galleries it will take you to a page listing all the galleries on the site.

**Don’t forget about the footer**

If your design offers it, and you find yourself wanting to add more navigation, consider moving a few items to the footer. This is a great place for more administrative items. You might even consider moving your Contact page to the footer.
Pages are different from galleries, in that they are constant. Typically, you create a page and it doesn’t change much. You can make a page for whatever you want and link it to your main navigation.

Two common pages that you will want to add to your site are an About page and a Contact page. These are both very important, so don’t overlook them in a rush to post your galleries.

The About Page

It may surprise you to learn that the About page is usually one of the most clicked pages on any website. Make it interesting! All too often, people just state where they live, marital status, and how many children or dogs they have. Try answering these questions:

- What is your photography about?
- Why should the visitor spend time looking at your photography?
- What are you trying to do with this site?

But don’t make it mushy art-speak.

The Contact Page

The Contact page will be an online form for people to contact you with the comments or questions. Creating one can be complicated if you build your own website, but you can do this with the click of a button in Smugmug and Squarespace (or other services). You can also leave additional contact information if you wish.

The design of this page does not matter much, just make sure you have one. Without this page, people will have no way of reaching you.
Designing a Site: Setting Up Your Galleries

Now it is time to start preparing your galleries. This page includes some tips for making sure you have the right pictures - and only the right pictures - in your gallery.

**Include only your best**

There is one very important thing to discuss at the outset, and that is to make sure that you are only displaying your very best work. Don’t let it paralyze you, but really try to make sure you are only including your best. That is sort of vague, so let’s try to make it more concrete. In that regard, here are some things to consider when you are making your list of pictures to include in your galleries:

- If the picture is similar to another in your portfolio, do not include it. This is the number one problem I see with most beginners - they include pictures that are similar. It is often difficult to decide between two pictures, but you must do it. There can be only one!
- Often you will have a picture where you think, “somebody might really like this one.” If there is any question, don’t use it.
- If there is any technical deficiency to the picture even if the picture works despite the issue, do not include it.

You are holding these pictures out to others as your best work. It needs to be your best or people will not take you seriously. Further, including weak images will cause people to look at your other pictures differently. In other words, a viewer might otherwise give you the benefit of the doubt that you know what you are doing, but if they just viewed an obviously weak picture, they will not do so. I do not want to harp on this, but it is the number one issue I see with people just starting portfolio sites.

**Number of pictures to include**

You might be wondering how many pictures to include. I cannot answer that specifically. It will depend on a lot of factors, including how long you have been shooting and how many great images you have. I have a couple of guidelines to share with you though:

1. If you have not been shooting long, I might just pick your 20 best images and post those in one gallery. Then wait until you have more great images before adding anything further.
2. If you have been shooting quite a while and have a lot of strong images, I might start with four or five galleries of between eight and twenty images in each. Even if you have more high-quality photos than this, start with that amount for now and you can add more later.
Methods of Organization

How should you organize your galleries? That's entirely up to you. There is no right or wrong way to do it. But here are some ways others have approached it:

**By location or event:** Many photographers start out by grouping their pictures according to a location or an event. This is a fine way to start, but be sure your pictures are not redundant.

**By category:** As they get more images, many photographers tend to call those into groupings called things like “landscapes” or “urban scenes.” This gives you a good opportunity to cull your pictures.

**By theme or project:** Finally, some photographers also group their photos by a particular theme or project. There might even be a title and artist statement associated with it.

I find that most beginners start with the first one (grouping by location or event). Then they gradually move on to sorting by category. Finally, at some point they decide to start creating projects. Not everybody does it that way - nor should they. In any event, try starting with one of these methods and you can adjust from there.

Show Your Best

One thing I recommend is having a “best of” or “favorites” gallery. People will naturally seek your best work as a starting point. You want to make it easy on them. If they like the “best” pictures, they will move on and check out other galleries as well. You don't want visitors starting with pictures that are not necessarily your absolute best. It might cause them to leave your site prematurely.

Ordering

Once you have decided upon the galleries on your website, think about how to order your pictures within those galleries. It is common to start and finish with the strongest photos, while placing the weaker ones in the middle. I recommend that you follow this approach. But I also suggest you just delete those weaker photos in the middle to make the overall gallery stronger.

Ordering Projects

If you have galleries that our projects or themes, there is a particular way photos are usually arranged. You usually start with a wide or establishing shot. This shot sets the stage. Now you can tell the story by mixing in close-ups and middle lengths. Varying the scene in this way adds interest and keeps the viewer from getting bored by looking at the same sort of picture over and over again.
Building Your Site

Now that you have designed your side and added pictures, you want to improve your site going forward and also attract visitors to it.

Adding (and Subtracting) Pictures

Building up your site necessarily means adding new pictures and galleries to it. This should naturally happen as you take more pictures. But don't try to go too fast. A rule of thumb I follow is to never have more than two or three pictures go on my website from any one day of shooting. That ensures that only the best pictures are making it.

Another important feature is to make sure you are removing pictures as well. This is a major key to strengthening your portfolio. If you are adding new strong pictures and occasionally removing the weakest pictures, your galleries will naturally improve.

Archiving

One tactic I use is to include a non-public gallery to house pictures you don't want to display at the moment. I call this folder on my website the archive. It is a non-public folder so nobody but me can see it. Rather than deleting pictures, I move them to the archive folder.

Most of the time, if I move a photo to the archive folder that means that I am done displaying it forever. I am saying to myself that I think I now have stronger pictures than this one and I no longer want to display it. But we all have a tendency to value our newest work over our older work. Sometimes I will decide that a photo I had relegated to the archive folder is better than I had given it credit for. And sometimes I put a good picture in the archive folder just because it doesn't fit in my current galleries, but it might fit another gallery later. Since the photo is in the archive folder, it is still on the website and I don't have to hunt for it or upload it again. This gives me flexibility in changing my galleries without a lot of additional searching for pictures and uploading.
Protecting Your Work

In some ways, I am the last person who should be discussing how to protect your work. I am very lacklaidical about it. In fact, I have a note on my website allowing people to use my pictures for whatever purpose they see fit as long as they attribute me.

If you are wondering why, there are two reasons. First, it is a fact that you are about 1000 times more likely to be ignored than you are to be taken advantage of. So I suggest that you do not obsess over protecting your pictures online.

Second, by placing your pictures online, no matter what you do to protect them, you are putting them at risk. There is simply no way you can stop someone that want to take your picture once it is online. Even the protections offered by the large services like Smugmug and Squarespace will not stop even a mildly determined thief.

That said, there are a few things you can do to protect your pictures. Some of those are:

1. **Right-click protect.** An easy way for people to download your pictures is to right-click on them and save them to their hard drive. Your online portfolio provider will probably offer protection against this. Be sure it is enabled if you want to protect your pictures.

2. **Watermarking.** I personally do not like watermarking. It seems pretentious. Nevertheless, it is a way to protect your pictures. It’s will be offered by most major services. Just don’t put a huge watermark in the middle of the picture. Make it small and put it in a corner of the picture.

3. **Resizing.** There is really no need to upload large pictures to your website. They will not show up any differently. If you upload small versions of the picture, then if it is stolen you will have limited the ability of the thief to use it. The online services will also allow you to limit the size of the picture that is displayed, so look for that option.
Attracting Visitors

The final thing you need to do, and in some ways the hardest thing to do, is to attract visitors to your website.

This can be challenging. There are tens of thousands of people posting their pictures to various sites on the internet. It is difficult to persuade people they should come spend time looking at your pictures. Further, pictures are difficult for the search engines to get their arms around given the lack of words associated with them. However, there are some things you can do to help your cause. Here are a few:

**Word of Mouth**

The first and most important thing you can do is to actually tell people about your website. This might seem obvious, but it is an often overlooked step. People don't want to tell their friends, but would rather wait for the hordes of internet visitors to stumble upon their site (this never happens). Spread the word.

**Interact Online**

The next thing you can do is to interact online with others who might want to come check out your website. Some good examples of this are:

- Interacting on Flickr and 500px, and including a link to your website from your profile page.
- Leaving comments on other blogs, while having a profile set up that links to your photography website.
- Interacting on photography forums. Again be sure your profile is set up and it includes a link to your website.

The more you give, the more you get. But don't be spammy about this. Do it tastefully.

**Provide Information**

Finally, include information about your pictures as titles, captions, or descriptions. The more information the better. At a minimum, include the location information.

I confess that all I do on my website is include location information. Nevertheless, particularly in remote or uncommon locations, I have had many visitors to the site who are looking for information about those particular locations. If you can write a description or other information to go along with the picture, all the better. The words give the search engines information to use regarding your site. Search engines are never going to send throngs of visitors to your site, but they can help. And every little bit helps.
Conclusion

When I think about all the ways photography in 2014 is better than it was 20 years ago - and there are a LOT of ways that is true - I put the portfolio website right at the top of the list. It is awesome to have your pictures available for the entire world to see. It is fun to watch your work progress and your site grow. Sometimes you will even get nice comments about your work or emails out of the blue, and it will make your day.

If things are slow when you start, just keep at it. I don't think anybody but my family and a few friends looked at my pictures for probably a year after I started my website. You aren't doing photography to get rich and famous. You are doing it because it is fun and you love it. Keep posting your pictures. Keep improving your photography, and the website will show your improvement. Keep telling people about your website and interacting online. People will come, but it takes time and persistent effort.

I hope this guide helps you pick out a service, set up a site, and get started with an online photography portfolio. I have used a lot of examples from my own website, and that is not because I have done it the best way (far from it), but I just want to give you concrete examples of how to do things, and to show you how I have done them. I change my site all the time. By the time you read this it may be different again. But that's part of the fun of it.