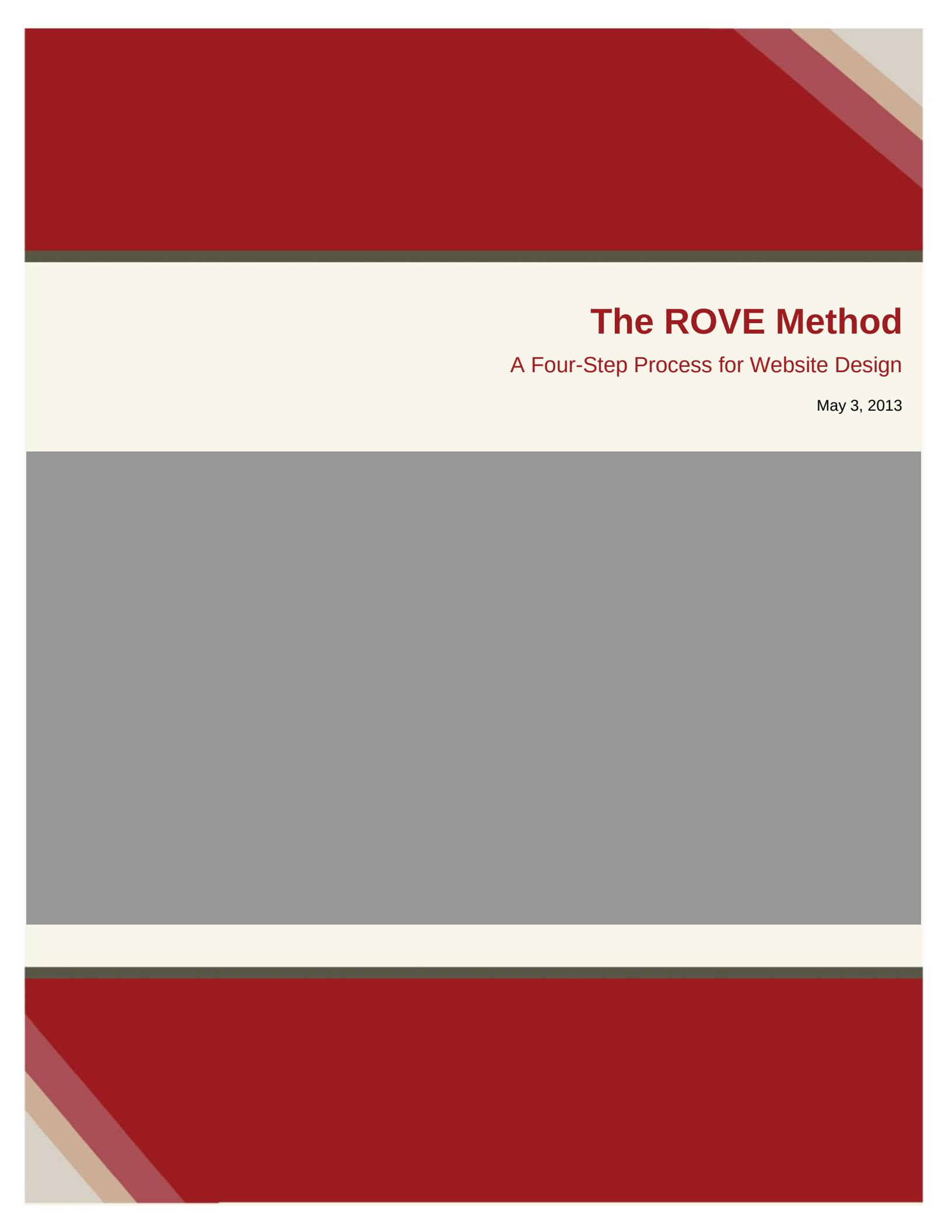




The ROVE Method

A Four-Step Process for Website Design

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Background

For some reason, communicators become frozen with the thought of launching a new website. Launching a new website that ultimately will serve as the eCommerce site for your business is extremely scary. However, launching an embedded webpage dedicated to an internal organization, program, or project within an intranet network should not strike fear. While websites rarely rank highly on the list of preferred communications channels, audiences like to have a central location to refer to for additional information. Therefore websites are a necessary evil. This doesn't mean that the strategic communicators should spend extensive time developing one. It is a useful vehicle for communications messaging but it will never serve as the primary method of engagement. Communicators should create a website but not spend too much time creating the website. How can this be done? Through a simple repeatable process of requirements gathering, obtaining buy-in and issuing the website, your comprehensive website could be up and running in less than a month.

The biggest hurdle I find with launching a new website is bridging the gap between the web developers and the client. The client either 1) wants a launched very quickly to get the information out as soon as possible despite the aesthetics 2) desires an extremely complex website based on a popular website with lots of bells and whistles for a small program or 3) has no clue how any of this works and will defer to you.

The other side of the river is the web developer. Some are awesome, some are not and all are busy. The main obstacle could be that the developer does not want to spend too much time on your program's small site when s/he is responsible for an entire network of websites. The problem could be:

- 1) The developers do not understand your "vision". They may hear requirements from clients such as, "I want a calendar but the calendar should be able to open and close. It should have the ability to click on dates to see the events without the calendar closing. Thanks." So they completely ignore all of that and just add a simple calendar. The client hates it and you are stuck in the middle.
- 2) They minimize your requirement. Say the current framework only supports black text. You want to create multiple colors within the site. They do not have time to change the code just for your site. As a workaround, they copy the desired text into a PDF and post as a document. We all know that audiences rarely click on documents. Do a simple web analytics scrub to see.
- 3) They lack creativity. This is perfectly fine. Web developers are not always designers and certainly the converse is true. Leaving the design to the developer is not wise as you want to ensure that the design is pleasure to the visitor.

To eliminate these issues I use what I termed as the ROVE method: Research, Outline, Visualize and Execute. This four-step method is a perfect way to develop repeatable processes to minimize headaches.

Research

The Research phase entails two aspects: internal and external. Before the need for a website arises, or possibly for your first project, become a mini-expert on websites within your client's organization for an intranet site. For an internet site, make you are familiar with platforms available to your organization, or if you can include within the existing external infrastructure. This is relatively easy. Many sites have a standard platform and framework with training available through a video, an in-person class or befriending the friendliest web developer. An overview could should instruct on basic functionality such as what widgets are available, how to add a page, text, graphic, etc. Also discover if maintenance of the website is decentralized. Then if the client requests a certain capability, you can let the client know instantly that it is not available, rather than wasting the developer's time. Also, it gives you an opportunity to include in the timeline if customization is required or not.

Next, talk to your client and get a list of solid requirements about their communications needs and purpose for the site:

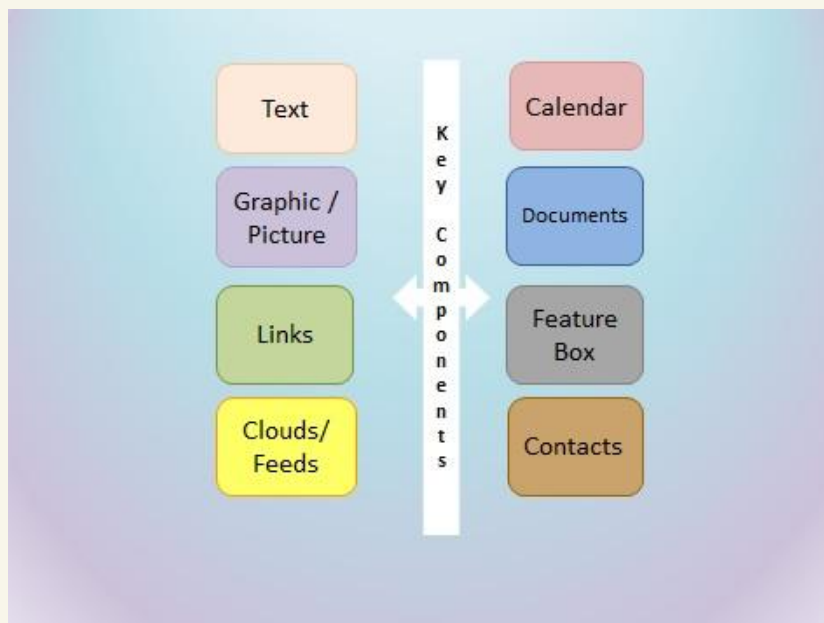
- Who is your audience?
- What do they need to know?
- What information do you want to include?
- Do you have a preferred design or color scheme?
- Do you have a logo? Pictures? External links/partner sites?
- Do you want two-way communications, such as a blog?
- Can all of the information fit on one page? Will it need multiple pages?
- What functional do you want? Scrolling images? Zooming in? Pop ups?
- Who will be the POC?
- Who will update the content? Is there a schedule?

Outline

Next is the part that no one does. It is okay. Communicators hate outlining. Remember in high school, when teachers strongly suggested that you outline your research papers before writing and you never did. Well, that may work—sometimes—but not for web content design. This exercise can be done with Post-Its, scrap paper or with PowerPoint. This is easy because websites only have a few key components:

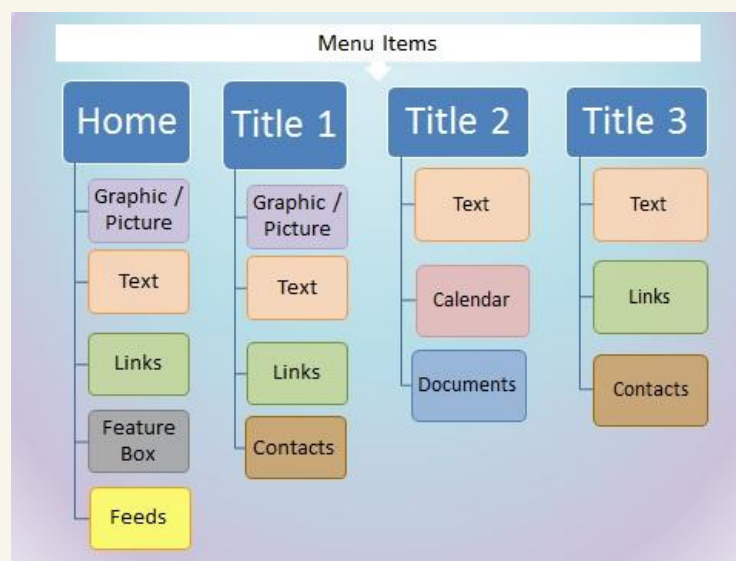
- Text
- Graphic/Picture
- Links
- Documents
- Calendars
- A Feature Box
- Clouds/Feeds

With this knowledge, I sketch out the actual website and internal pages. For example, let's say you are launching a website for a new training program. First, I list out the pages: Home – About the Program – Training Courses – Resources. Then I color code each of the major elements listed above.



Then I assign values to each color coded box. Websites need lots of white space to break up the content and make it easier for the visitor to read. Users prefer not to scroll too much, so you should ensure that you do not have too much on the page. If too much content exists, you should add another interior webpage. However, you do want to minimize clicks to the industry standard of three. It also helps if you embed links everywhere—within the text, on the menu bar—to provide multiple ways to access information.

Basically you create a robust, visually appealing site index. The next step is to take to the client for approval of the outline. Incorporate any edits and move on to Visualize.





Visualize

In the Visualize phase, use a simple PowerPoint slide to mock up a few pages. This is not a real site and you don't need to develop actual content as this point. You can just use boxes and circles to represent where the graphic will go or calendar, then I use text (not actual, maybe latin or nursery rhymes) to mimic the text. I include a little note to explain functionality –graphic scrolls, etc. This will assist both the client and the developer. To consider things like, “should the calendar open in a new page, or on top of the website as a pop-up?”

This visualization helps in two ways. First, you will understand what the final product should look like. You can look and see if you have enough information, determine if it looks sparse or too cluttered or if anything is missing. This mock will serve as a guide for the developers. Second, it will serve as a guide for the developer. You can decide where the “Contact Us” tab should go, or the search bar. Any possibility of forgetting basic, practical functionality is minimized. This probably shouldn’t be hand drawn unless you are an exceptional artist. Do need just write out a list of contents as this is confusing and the web developer may not understand the spatial and aesthetic aspects. Once the client reviews and approves this final mock-up, you can work with the web developer to operationalize. It is also useful if you provide examples of website you like with the functionality you want on your site. Once all of the details are determined, it is time to execute.

Execute

The final phase is to Execute. To do that, develop a timeline. Determine: What are the Dependencies? Do you need the support of a graphic designer? Do you need to create content? I also return to my visual site index and include a note to if the data exists or needs to be created. With this information, the development of a robust timeline with considerations for other contributors—graphic designers, developers, content managers-- is possible. This process should take less than a month. I spent about one day to gather research, one day to outline and another day to visualize. The longest part of the process should be execution, especially when you include the other contributors. The final step within the last phase is to operationalize—create website, test the functionality, obtain approval and launch.

With this repeatable process, the ROVE method simplifies website creation.

