Most charity web sites...

...are built on the premise that donors and prospective donors come to the site because they want information about the charity.

My contrarian premise is that donors and prospective donors are not looking for information.

Instead, they are looking for confirmation.

They have read the mail appeals. They've had a satisfying emotional experience. So they come to the Web site – seeking … confirmation.

And just what provides confirmation? Another emotional experience. After all, giving money away is an emotional process. Maybe a few donors give money for rational reasons. Very few.

So when a donor arrives at the charity web site, what do they find? Information.

This is usually the fault of Web designers, who often don't have any basic grounding in magazine advertising -- or any kind of advertising.

Web designers are trained to organize information. Information. Information. They understand how to cross reference it. How to crowd it into a small space.

Programmers think of a Web site as a store, full of merchandise. And so they fill up the landing page with crowded shelves of merchandise.

They operate on the theory that visitors to the Web site are shopping for something that might be in the store.

They don't grasp the concept that a Web landing page is like a magazine ad. And what makes a winning ad?

Something that catches your eye! (More on that in just a moment!)

If nothing catches the eye of the visitor, how do you stop the finger from clicking and the visitor from leaving?

By organizing information? Never. Reading and digesting information requires intense mental activity. That's at opposite poles from the need for emotional confirmation.

But back up — to the day when the Web site originated. A charity staff person was assigned as manager and keeper of the Web site. Many times that person is not related to the marketing and fundraising department.

And the manager sits down with the Web designer and says: "Our donors and the public need to know certain things about us. Build a Web site that tells them what they need to know."

So then the Web designer and the charity staff come up with a list of 45 important facts that the donor needs to know. And all 45 facts end up on the landing page with 45 headings and 45 buttons for clicking.

Okay, so I'm exaggerating.
My point is, a landing page that is very busy with information fails to stop and engage the visitor.

Conclusion: if we ask: "what is the most powerful image that will stop a visitor from moving on?" we come up with this.

Eyes.

Eyes looking at the visitor. No mental activity involved. Eyes looking at the visitor's eyes. Entrapment. Curiosity.

Can't keep from looking at the eyes.

A child's eyes. A puppy's eyes. A pair of sad adult eyes. An elephant's eyes. A mother's eyes. A baby's eyes.

The Web visitor's eyes looking at the eyes on the Web page. Suddenly the mouse is not clicking. The visitor is captured.

And what has happened is a marketing term called pre-selling. Without pre-selling, there can be no selling. You can't hit a customer of the head and insist on a sale. You have to pre-sell first.

When you walk into a furniture store because you've seen an ad offering a sofa for half price and no money down and no interest for two years – you've been pre-sold.

It's another way of saying: sell the sizzle, not the steak. Translate that into fundraising and you get:

Sell the tears, not the statistics.

Sell the sickness, not the cure.

Sell the problem not the solution.

Sell the sick kid, not the mission statement.

And so on.

So let's get this organized a bit more: A Web page has several pre-selling elements on it, ranking from highest to lowest:

1.   Eyes – from the face on the lead photograph. The single most dominate image on the landing page.

2.   The caption under the photograph. (Or to the side, depending on the layout.)

3.   The main headline. And this has to be really strong.

4.   The sub-headline. This is drawing the visitor away from other distractions. The fingers relax on the mouse.

5.   The story. Once the visitor either begins reading or scanning, you've won.

And don't make the visitor click to finish the story. Another page has to load. The wait. The emotion fades.

(Or if you do move the story to another page, be sure and put everything that is on the left of the landing page, on the left of the page where the story ends.)

Finally, the eyes of the visitor will move away, and look at other things on the landing page. To the left. Always to the left. Hopefully some graphic or other photo or headline will keep the visitor reading.

The longer the visitor says on the site, the more apt the person is to make a gift, or at least have a good experience that will carry over into the next mail appeal.

This is all so simple. But the "encyclopedia complex" is strong in the charity back office.

When I used to tell a charity committee, "photo on the right, information on the left, they patted me on the head and show me the door.

Guess I needed to find a way to say that with intensely convoluted programming language.