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## The Gilbert Email Manifesto (GEM)

*by Michael C. Gilbert*

Repeat after me: "**Email is more important than my web site!**"

I can't stand it any more. I've listened to too many four-hour workshops about online fundraising in which it's all about web sites, web sites, web sites. I've been to too many technical assistance sites that have class after class on web design. I've heard too many nonprofits obsess about their web sites.

I ask leaders of nonprofit organizations if they have an email strategy and their usual response is something on the order of "huh?" They are spending enormous amounts of money and staff time on their web sites and it's the rare exception that the organization even has enough of an email strategy to have a newsletter.

They are wasting their money. I'm serious.

Why is this happening? Is it because web sites are pretty and email is mostly text? Is it because people love graphic design? Is it because this is the approach that is pushed by the consulting firms? Or is it perhaps because thinking about email is a little more difficult, as it is a constantly moving target?

I don't know the reasons for sure, but I do know that something can be done. I have been recommending "Three Rules of Email" to help nonprofit organizations develop a genuine Internet strategy and avoid being seduced by their own web presence:

**Rule #1: Resources spent on email strategies are more valuable than the same resources spent on web strategies.**

**Rule #2: A web site built around an email strategy is more valuable than a web site that is built around itself.**

**Rule #3: Email oriented thinking will yield better strategic thinking overall.**

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Nonprofits that truly embrace these three rules will reach a genuine breakthrough in their online presence. They will seize the initiative from technologists and guide their own technology on their terms.

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Let me elaborate. For each of these principles I will scratch the surface as to why it's true and how it might be applied. Each of these is worthy of several workshops in their own right.

**Rule #1: Resources spent on email strategies are more valuable than the same resources spent on web strategies.**

However unglamorous it might be, email is the killer application of the Internet. It is person-to-person communication, and the one thing that breaks down barriers faster than anything else on the net. Consider these facts:

- Everybody on the net has email and most of them read most of their messages.
- People visit far fewer websites than they get email messages.
- Email messages are treated as To Do items, while bookmarks are often forgotten. Email is always a call to action.
- Email is handled within a familiar user interface, whereas each website has to teach a new interface.
- Email is a very personal medium.

Stop obsessing about how many hits your web site gets and start counting how much email interaction you have with your stakeholders. Stop waiting for people to discover your web site, and start discovering their mailboxes.

**Rule #2: A web site built around an email strategy is more valuable than a web site that is built around itself.**

On some nonprofit list, somewhere, someone right now is asking how they can get more traffic on their web site. And someone is answering by telling them how to put META tags in their site so they will get listed in search engines. This is so tired....

My answer to this tired question is simple: Send them there with email!

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Obviously this means there has to be a purpose for them to go to the web site that cannot be fulfilled with the email message itself. Some of the obvious ways that a web site can supplement your email strategy include:

- gathering email addresses in the first place
- archiving your relationships with stakeholders (ex: collecting the results of surveys)
- serving as a library to back up your smaller email communications
- providing actual online tools for your stakeholders
- providing web forms that allow you to structure your communication and pull it into databases

**Rule #3: Email oriented thinking will yield better strategic thinking overall.**

Last year, the most common question I was asked by journalists reporting on the Internet and nonprofits was about the role of the Internet in fundraising. The true power of the Internet for fundraising (or any other stakeholder relationship) is the power of personal communication combined with the power of scale. Nonprofits know how to mobilize people on a personal level. By using the Internet appropriately, they can do so on a scale never before possible.

Understanding email will make this possible. True, not all personal, online communication takes place through email, but email is the canonical "closed loop relationship" that direct marketing managers understand so well. Applied well, it will allow nonprofits to succeed on a whole new level.

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