

# Fear and loathing in the marketing world

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## *Guilt-based approach has mixed results*

### Reasons to believe

When Thomas a Becket is slain in T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, the act is described as "the greatest treason, to do the right deed for the wrong reason".

The observation might just ring a bell with companies and organizations that favor guilt marketing. The approach of guilt marketers is to encourage people to buy into products or services, or act in a certain way, not because it is right or it will bring happiness, but because failure to do so will leave them feeling bad about themselves.

Jo Roberts asks whether "guilt [is] really the new fear" as a new book would appear to suggest. In *Guilt Trip* by Alex Hesz and Bambos Neophytou, the authors, suggest that "guilt has taken over from fear as a dominant human emotion". Many advertisers and marketers give credence to this assessment.

Julia Lagan of the Archibald Ingall Stretton agency says: "It's proven, via the psychological phenomenon of "negativity bias" that bad is more attention-getting than good."

### Familiar refrain

Few organizations have been more adept at playing this tune than the UK's Central Office of Information (COI) which has used guilt to motivate changes in behavior, perhaps most notably through anti-smoking and anti-drinking campaigns. The logic behind the campaigns is that, while smokers might dismiss health implications that affect themselves, it is harder to ignore the effects of their behavior on loved ones: children getting cancer through secondary smoking, or families destroyed by drink-fuelled violence.

That thinking is summed up by a Department of Health spokesperson who said that the anti-smoking advertisements were designed "to cause an emotional reappraisal to make smokers stop and think about the effects of their behavior, especially on children".

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Many advertisers and marketers understand this and John Poorta of Leo Burnett, an agency that handles COI advertising, says that a positive emotion can sometimes serve as a better way to motivate people to change their behavior. Some charities have taken their guilt-based donation pleas too far. A few years ago one charity, in a mail shot, asked people how they would feel if they were blind, phrasing it in such a way as to suggest that they should be more guilty about their own good vision than about a Third World child's bad vision, caused by the need for a cataract operation.



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Advertisers and marketers are as adept at responding to the public mood as they are at creating it, and guilt-free marketing is a growing phenomenon. For example, Roberts cites the case of Virgin Active, which puts a positive spin on attending health clubs, rather than relying on the time-honored association between exercise and guilt.

### Flipping a coin

It is easy for the consumer who thinks about these things too much to feel excessively manipulated by advertisers and marketers who use one technique for a products and services advertising campaign, then flip the coin to go for a contradictory approach for another campaign. But there are a growing number of examples of companies who are at least integrating customers more actively into certain phases of the development process.

In their article, Fuchs, Prandelli and Schreier cite the case of companies such as M&Ms which involved more than ten million consumers in voting eight years ago for a new color; and Fiat, who involved customers in several aspects of the product development process.

Threadless, a new Chicago-based fashion company, allowed its customers to determine the designs that are going to be marketed. Fuchs *et al.* examined the first set of studies into the psychological consequences of the Threadless initiative. The key hypothesis is that customers empowered in this way will reveal a stronger demand for the products than non-empowered customers.

Using the example of Threadless, 264 undergraduate students at a European university participated in the experiment. Four classes were randomly assigned to the treatment group or to one of the three control groups. It emerged that, despite the products being of an equal quality, they favored the ones through which they had been involved in decision-making. Checks and balances were introduced to account, for example, for the fact that mere repetition – they had seen the t-shirts before – might lead the treatment group to favor the products. Further studies suggest that a feeling of “psychological ownership” dictates this response. Research reveals, however, that in some circumstances there will be a diminution of this psychological ownership effect.

### Disenchantment

If the joint decision-making process reveals results which do not chime with the consumers’ own views, they are likely to become disenchanted, rather in the same way that voters can become disillusioned with the political process if they feel their views are not remotely reflected in any of the political parties. The same diminutory effect can occur, too, if consumers feel that they are getting out of their depth and do not have the competence to make these decisions. At the same time, this research does raise questions about loyalty, suggesting that consumers involved in this way might feel a greater connection with an organization. There could be considerable mileage to be gained from examining the way consumers react to having input into the selection of advertising campaigns, or in having a say about the choices firms make for social responsibility projects.

“Media-savvy” consumers do not always think they are treated as intelligent, rational beings when they are being sold products and services. It is certainly true that many marketers might be surprised at consumers’ sophisticated understanding of the nuances of their trade. Because marketing and advertising are taught at various levels in schools and colleges,



people tend to understand many of the processes and means by which they are being manipulated.

The corollary is lower brand loyalty combined with a greater willingness to switch to other brands, which puts more pressure on marketers to get their message across in a way that will still have a significant impact. “In your face” marketing will always have its place, but less conventional, more indirect strategies are gaining an increasing amount of attention.

Such tactics – stealth marketing – include viral marketing, brand pushing and celebrity marketing. Roy and Chattopadhyay suggest a good definition of stealth marketing as “a deliberate act of entering, operating in, or exiting a market in a furtive, secretive or imperceptible manner, or an attempt to do so”. They view stealth marketing as a concept that is only now being seen as mainstream, rather than a left-field gadfly.

Contemporary stealth marketing strategies can be classified by considering their use in relation to marketing’s essential elements: product, price, promotion and place. Pricing strategy, for example, can include both cuts and increases, with the former occasionally obscuring the latter: some printer manufacturers have slashed prices of cartridges while reducing volumes of ink. The consumer is worse off, not better. Some strategies are hidden from target customers; others are more transparent.

### Ethical concerns

In fact, the most commonly used marketing practices are visible to both customers and competitors. Stealth marketing usually involves some form of “subterfuge” – invisibility to customers, or to competitors; or, invisibility to both sides, which offers the greatest ethical concern. An example of the first category is where a product’s business origins are hidden, perhaps for the purposes of reinvention. Kentucky Fried Chicken became KFC partly to get away from the unhealthy connotations of the word “fried”. “Flogs” are a somewhat more dubious example of this practice: fake blogs which provide positive publicity and are the work of people paid by the company, rather than disinterested enthusiasts.

The further shores of stealth marketing – invisible to competitors and customers – include ambush marketing, for example where companies create a false impression that they are a major event’s main sponsors – and push-polling, which aims to change the views of potential voters under the guise of conducting a poll.

Lack of transparency and stealth marketing do seem to go hand in hand, and its future must lie in the ability of practitioners to negotiate the narrow dividing line between the acceptable and the unacceptable, or face more regulation. Even attempts to use stealth marketing as a force for good are on dangerous ground. At worst, bodies with totally opposing views could use it. Pro-abortion campaigners do not doubt they are in the right, and neither do pro-lifers. Even with less controversial issues, the question would remain: are people being manipulated excessively into acting in a particular fashion? Another case, perhaps, of the right deed for the wrong reason.

### Comment

This review is based on “The guilt appeal (guilt marketing as a means of influencing consumer behavior)” by Roberts (2009), “The psychological effects of empowerment

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strategies on consumers' product demand", by Fuchs *et al.* (2010) and "Stealth marketing as a strategy", by Roy and Chattopadhyay (2010).

Roberts (2004) offers an enlightening and entertaining summary of the appeals of guilt-marketing to practitioners, and the limitations of which a growing number of people in the trade are becoming increasingly aware.

Fuchs *et al.* (2010) offer some original research which sheds interesting light on human nature and our ability to convince ourselves about a product's validity in the face of no compelling evidence.

Roy and Chattopadhyay's article covers some ground familiar to marketers, while offering the layman a comprehensive account of the issues, including ethical dilemmas.

## References

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