Guilty appeal

A couple of weeks ago I went into a small local specialty store that does not get a lot of foot traffic. The store sells lots of expensive gift items, and a few lower cost items such as cards and candles. I needed to buy a greeting card and like this store's small but unique selection. I found what I wanted and when I went to pay the store owner, she asked me, quite pointedly, "that's it?" Then she started asking whether I wanted to look at the handcrafted candlesticks and other gift items. Her remarks made it clear that she needed more business and that my one $3 card was not going to cut it.

She was trying to give me a guilt trip.

If you look up the term "guilt trip" you will come up with several psychology-based articles such as "7 ways to get out of guilt trips", which define what a guilt trip is and why people use it. Basically, people use guilt trips in *an effort to control behavior*. Although guilt trips may reach their mark, they often cause resentment and anger toward the "guilt tripper."

And I definitely felt resentment when I left the store. On the one hand, I felt bad for the store owner and wondered how she was going to stay in business. On the other hand, I felt angry since I had specifically gone to this store to buy a special card and this woman seemed to think that it was my responsibility to spend more than a few dollars to help save her business.

But is the guilt trip an effective strategy?

This got me thinking about how some charities –specifically those dealing with hunger, homelessness, and disaster relief– use guilt as an appeal for donors. These charities generally intend to appeal to your feelings of guilt for having access to comfort and food while others, who are much less fortunate,

starve and suffer.

I am sure you remember the TV commercial for a children's charity that would show pictures of starving children in Africa, often focusing on their distended stomachs and the horrible conditions around them. We were told that we could ease the suffering simply by sponsoring one child for the price of a cup of coffee a day. The underlying message was clear: you should feel guilty buying your daily coffee when that money could save a child's life.

Do you feel manipulated by these type of appeals? Or is this appeal to your feelings of guilt an effective way to break through the clutter and inspire action (a donation)?

Guilt trips have consequences

Guilt trips *are* effective in *forcing* action (after all, how many parents have used the line about starving children in Africa to get kids to finish eating their meals) but they may have negative consequences. Perhaps you **stop feeling guilty** once you've made a donation and then never donate again. Or perhaps, you **resent** being made to feel guilty and you **ignore the appeal** altogether. In some cases, an appeal to guilt has been so many times that the **audience has become jaded**.

What's the alternative?

For charities, an alternative is to emphasize how *helping is a benefit* to the donor. This way, the potential donor is not doing something out of guilt, and therefore feels good about his or her act. As a bonus, there's no chance that the donor will feel resentment afterward.

Have you used the guilt trip as a marketing tool? Why or why not? And if yes, how did it work for you?

P.S. As I was writing this post, I got an email donation appeal that started with these words (emphasis mine):

*In this moment when we are bombarded by **shocking images of refugees risking their lives in search of safety**, we must do all we can to help.*

*I know this because **I have seen the fear in the eyes of refugees as they describe fleeing their homes in the dark of night**.*

I have sat with refugees as they shared their stories of being resettled in my home state of Ohio, and elsewhere in the U.S., overcoming language and cultural barriers to live their lives with freedom and security.