

Nudge or think: What works best for our society?

September 21 2012

If approached in the right way, citizens are willing to change their behaviour and do more to help themselves and others, according to research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The project, carried out jointly at the universities of Manchester and Southampton, experimented with different interventions techniques which encourage citizen participation and explored people's motivations for community involvement.

The researchers focused on comparing the effectiveness of 'nudge' techniques, where people are offered incentives to change their behaviour, and 'think' techniques, which takes a planned approach where people are given information, the opportunity to discuss and debate a subject, and then opportunity to act. Overall, they found that while the nudge interventions yielded better results, these were not always sustained in the long term.

Individuals responded well to nudge techniques such as doorstep canvassing, receiving feedback on their actions and to public recognition of their contribution. For example, in a [recycling](#) experiment, there was a ten per cent increase in household recycling as a result of doorstep canvassing – a nudge technique. Unfortunately, this effect did not last and after three months the increase was just four per cent.

In another experiment people were asked to pledge used books to their local library. When the donors were told that their names would be made public, another nudge technique, donations went up by 22 per cent.

The 'think' technique experiments, though less successful, offered unexpected results. On-line debate forums where people were given information on a topic and the opportunity to discuss it resulted in modest changes in their policy positions. However, this approach failed to encourage participation among people that were not already politically engaged.

Another experiment, using both techniques, attempted to encourage students to add their names to the organ [donor](#) register. Dividing students into three groups the researchers found that the group given an information booklet on organ donation experienced a 34 per cent increase in registrations; the placebo group given information on swine flu recorded a 30 per cent increase in registrations; but the group given the information on organ donation and time to discuss it achieved a 15 per cent increase in registrations.

"The think experiments gave us more modest results, but it does not mean that Governments should dismiss this approach," argues Professor John. "Face-to-face techniques, more so than on-line, offer the potential for a richer and more complex platform for discussion and participation."

The researchers also identified that people with positive feelings about their neighbourhood, but with a distrust of government institutions, are more likely to get involved in their local area.

"The findings are very positive and supports the idea that a local approach using nudge and think techniques can lead to citizens getting involved in collective neighbourhood activities," states Professor John. "In order to sustain any actions the Government has to adopt a more experimental culture, using local authorities and groups as well. Based on our findings we suggest that a mixture of nudge and think techniques combined with opportunity for positive two-way feedback - government

to citizen and citizen to government - is needed."

Provided by Economic & Social Research Council

Citation: Nudge or think: What works best for our society? (2012, September 21) retrieved 23 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-09-nudge-society.html>

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