

Science for Environment Policy

Influencing environmental behaviour through nudging and information

One of the greatest challenges facing environmental policymakers is encouraging people to behave more sustainably. A recent study explores how 'nudging' people to make environmentally friendly choices, together with providing information, can be a successful combination for achieving behavioural change.

Policymakers have a number of options available to them to encourage sustainable behaviour. Regulations and taxes are used to make sustainable living more financially desirable, and information campaigns provide the best possible information to encourage individuals to act sustainably. However, these measures do not always bring about the desired changes.

Recently, policymakers have been investigating insights from psychology and behavioural economics for ways of altering consumer behaviour and 'nudging' people towards more [environmentally friendly](#) behaviour. Nudging can alter people's behaviour by changing their social or physical environment in subtle ways that unconsciously trigger the desired behaviour.

In this study, the researchers argue that there is little evidence to suggest that information campaigns alone can actually persuade people to make long-term behavioural changes. A better strategy may be to combine good information with knowledge of how people make decisions, nudging them towards sustainable choices.

For example, in the EU, the energy efficiency of electrical appliances was rated on a seven-point coloured scale, from A to G. In 2010, the labels of several appliances were redesigned to keep up with technological improvements and the new scale had three green grades above class A (A+++, A++ and A+) and the lowest grade became D. Following this change, a Danish study found that the new labels were only half as effective as the original labels in persuading consumers to buy the most energy-efficient TV.

Consumers judged all classes with an A as being more energy efficient than other letters and did not differentiate between the classes at the upper end of the scale as clearly as before. This shows that simply providing more information does not necessarily help, the researchers say: one also needs to account for the mental shortcuts people use when processing the information. This is where nudging can play an important role.

For instance, installing smart meters is an essential part of upgrading the electricity grid system, but some consumers are wary about letting their supplier remotely control their electricity consumption, a function of some smart meters. A Danish survey found that the way people are asked about smart meter installation substantially affects the uptake rate. Making acceptance the default response, but with an opt-out option, resulted in almost 50% more people agreeing to the installation than by asking them to opt in. In this way the public were 'nudged' towards the more sustainable choice.

A further example is provided by an American study which found that people who thought that their neighbours cared about conserving energy were more likely to say that they themselves actively tried to conserve energy. In other words, the perception that those around them conserved energy 'nudged' them towards this behaviour.

These case studies demonstrate that, by providing people with information, which they consciously process, together with nudging cues targeted at unconscious motivations, can encourage a desired shift towards environmentally friendly lifestyle habits.



18 June 2014
Issue 377

**Subscribe to free
weekly News Alert**

Source: Ölander, F. & Thøgersen, J. (2014). Informing Versus Nudging in Environmental Policy. *Journal of Consumer Policy*. DOI:10.1007/s10603-014-9256-2.

Contact: jbt@asb.dk

Read more about:
[Sustainable consumption and production](#),
[Environmental information services](#),
[Sustainable development and policy assessment](#)

The contents and views included in *Science for Environment Policy* are based on independent, peer-reviewed research and do not necessarily reflect the position of the European Commission.

To cite this article/service: "[Science for Environment Policy](#)": European Commission DG Environment News Alert Service, edited by SCU, The University of the West of England, Bristol.