

Nudge, nudge, wink, wink... do you know what I mean?

The Government is investing in science to change the way we behave, but DICK LUMSDEN is sceptical

The advertising industry has known for a long time that the way to a customer's wallet is through their mind.

Influencing your buying decisions through the power of persuasion is the lifeblood of the industry, and a lot of very clever people spend a lot of time in refining and perfecting the best way to separate you from your cash.

The science behind advertising not only predicts your behaviour, it actually shapes your behaviour and makes you do things you never intended. I mean, why else would anyone ever buy Marmite?

Everyone now knows that big supermarkets have in-store bakeries because the smell of newly baked bread makes you feel good, makes you feel hungry, and makes you buy more than you intended. Most people also know that where things are displayed in a supermarket is the result of much research, putting everyday things like milk and butter at the back and making you stay longer in the store while you go for them. Or putting the fresh fruit and veg at the front so you buy them first and feel less guilty about buying convenience food as you go round.

So I suppose it is no real surprise that the Government has finally cottoned on to this behavioural manipulation.

It seems that every year in the UK, nearly £40 billion is "lost" in the public sector either through fraud, uncollected tax debts, or simple financial errors. The law is not, it would appear, enough to deter people from false benefit claims, or not declaring the right tax liability, or even in filling in forms wrongly. So the Government has turned to the murky world of behavioural science.

And in a reference almost straight out of the comedy classic *Yes Minister*, the department in question is known to insiders as the "nudge unit".

Officially called the Behavioural Insights Team, these chaps in the "nudge unit" have been finding ways of persuading people to stump up more tax, or reduce false claims.

In one trial, HMRC sent a variety of letters to 140,000 people. Some of the letters were bog standard, demanding unpaid tax. But others contained statements such as "nine out of ten people in Britain pay their tax on time" or



DO IT THIS WAY: A mother hippo gives her calf a helpful nudge but how susceptible are we to a bit of psychological nudging?

Photo: AP/Ken Bohn

What they discovered was that the letters using the subconscious "nudges" produced a 15% higher response. And that, if scaled up over the whole country, would rake in an estimated £160 million extra every year.

I'm not convinced though. Trying to influence people's behaviour to make them better citizens is a very laudable objective, but, like many other initiatives inspired by our politicians, I can't really see it working as well as they say.

We only have laws because there are people in society who just don't want to play along with the rest of us. Talking nicely to them isn't going to change that, no matter how big of a nudge they are given. I think we need to see a lot more evidence before we can say with any kind of authority that "nudging" works.

Maybe they should widen the net and roll out their testing to other areas. Take obesity for instance. The "nudge unit" could

meal"...or four out of six people actually get off their backside and do some exercise now and again.

Or they could "nudge" down the crime rate with a poster campaign saying Heston Blumenthal is going to be responsible for the menus in Britain's prisons and police cells. That should be a big enough deterrent for anyone thinking of shinning up a drainpipe this weekend.

I've been doing a bit of digging, and discovered that, in other countries, this subtle use of "nudging" is already in widespread use – and in some wacky ways. In Holland, the answer to the problem of men missing the urinals when they went into public toilets was to put a picture of a small fly on the porcelain near the drain. With a target to aim at, spillage reduced – and so did cleaning costs.

In Sweden, a system of lights were installed above the holes in a bottle bank, flashing them at random and turning recycling

People were queuing up to have a go apparently.

And of course it is America that is home to the "nudge" – and the original text book on the subject written by two advisers to Barack Obama. He used it to great effect in his pre-election campaign when millions of potential donors were "nudged" into giving more money with the promise that their names would go into a draw, with the winners having dinner with the great man. The odds against them winning were huge, but the "nudge" was enough to pay for his race to the White House.

At the end of the day, it's all about getting us to open our wallets.

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