Making Good Citizenship Fun

Jim Stoten

By RICHARD H. THALER

Published: February 13, 2012

La Jolla, Calif.

GOVERNMENTS typically use two tools to encourage citizens to engage in civic behavior like paying their taxes, driving safely or recycling their garbage: exhortation and fines. These efforts are often ineffective. So it might be a good time to expand the government’s repertory to include positive reinforcement. Rewarding good behavior can work.

As every successful parent learns, one way to encourage good behavior, from room-cleaning to tooth-brushing, is to make it fun. Not surprisingly, the same principle applies to adults. Adults like to have fun, too.
In this spirit, the Swedish division of Volkswagen has sponsored an initiative they call The Fun Theory. Their first project is documented in a highly popular (and fun) YouTube video. The idea was to get people to use a set of stairs rather than the escalator that ran alongside it. By transforming the stairs into a piano-style keyboard such that walking on the steps produced notes, they made using the stairs fun, and they found that stair use increased by 66 percent.

The musical stairs idea is more amusing than practical, so The Fun Theory sponsored a contest to generate other ideas. The winning entry suggested offering both positive and negative reinforcement to encourage safe driving. Specifically, a camera would measure the speed of passing cars. Speeders would be issued fines but some of the fine revenues would be distributed via lottery to drivers who were observed obeying the speed limit. A short test of the idea offered promising results.

This example illustrates an important behavioral point: many people love lotteries.

Some governments are already using this insight. Most colorfully, New Taipei City in Taiwan recently initiated a lottery as an inducement for dog owners to clean up after their pets. Owners who deposited dog waste into a special depository were made eligible for a lottery to win gold ingots, thus literally turning dog waste into gold. The top prize was worth about $2,000. The city reports that it halved the fecal pollution in its streets during the initiative.

Over in mainland China, lotteries are used for a different purpose: tax compliance. As in many parts of the world, China has a thriving cash economy, and it is common for small businesses like restaurants to evade paying sales tax. To combat this behavior, the government printed up special receipts that are supposed to be given to restaurant customers when they pay. Cleverly, each receipt includes a scratch-off lottery ticket, giving customers an incentive to ask for a receipt. Finance ministers in Southern Europe might take note.

Lotteries may also serve as effective motivators toward better health. A group of scholars including Kevin G. M. Volpp, a physician and social scientist at the University of Pennsylvania, ran an experiment to encourage the employees at a health care management company to undertake a health risk assessment. One group of employees was offered a 25 percent chance to win $100 as an inducement to participate. The lottery was an effective motivator, increasing participation by about 20 percentage points.

In using lotteries to motivate it is important to get the details right. Participants are likely to find a lottery more enticing if they find out whether they would have won. The Dutch government uses this principle very effectively. One of its state lotteries is based on postal codes. If your postal code is announced as the winner, you know that you would have won had you only bought a ticket. The idea is to play on people’s feelings of regret.

Lotteries are just one way to provide positive reinforcement. Their power comes from the fact that the chance of winning the prize is overvalued. Of course you can simply pay people for doing the right thing, but if the payment is small, it could well backfire. (If the total dog-prize money had been divided up evenly among all those who turned in their baggies, I estimate that the price paid would have been about 25 cents per bag. Would anyone bother for that?)
An alternative to lotteries is a frequent-flyer-type reward program, where the points can be redeemed for something fun. A free goodie can be a better inducement than cash since it offers that rarest of commodities, a guilt-free pleasure. This sort of reward system has been successfully used in England to encourage recycling. In the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead outside of London, citizens could sign up for a rewards program in which they earned points depending on the weight of the material they recycled. The points were good for discounts at merchants in the area. Recycling increased by 35 percent.

The moral here is simple. If governments want to encourage good citizenship, they should try making the desired behavior more fun.

Richard H. Thaler, a professor of economics and behavioral science at the Booth School of Business at the University of Chicago, is the author, with Cass R. Sunstein, of “Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness.”