

Tyler Morning Telegraph

Editorial: Are nutrition labels nudging us toward better health?

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Whether you know it or not, you're being nudged a lot these days. The new "science" or behavioral economics has been seized upon by government at all levels, in an attempt to persuade the people to behave in more governable ways.

It's evident in everything from higher taxes on products deemed unhealthy to nutrition labels on food.

But do nudges really work? That's something that the Cato Institute's Regulation magazine has studied in its latest issue.

"Behavioral economists frequently argue that well-designed nudges can steer individuals toward smarter decisions that enhance their welfare," author Michael L. Marlow writes. "In their book 'Nudge,' Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein argue that government 'choice architects' can nudge individuals away from numerous unconscious and irrational decisions that stem from a whole host of psychological, social, cognitive, and emotional factors. Over-eating, inadequate retirement saving, and smoking are a few examples of behavior believed to benefit from nudges."

So it's fair to ask whether they work. Marlow looks specifically at nutrition labels.

"Nudge theorists believe that nutritional labels that list calorie and other attributes of foods sold in supermarkets and restaurants help nudge consumers toward more healthful dietary choices," he explains. "Toward that end, the federal Nutrition Labeling and Education Act of 1990 requires mandatory 'Nutrition Facts Panels' on most packaged foods. Since 2008, various cities, counties, and states have required restaurants to post calorie and other nutritional information on their offerings. New York City, for example, implemented mandatory calorie labeling in July 2008."

But it's not that simple. For a nutrition label to successfully nudge a consumer toward better habits, a series of events has to occur, Marlow writes.

"The extent to which labeling changes health outcomes is proportional to the occurrence of each of the following four steps: Consumers read the labels, consumers understand the labels, consumers, as a result, improve their food choices, and [then] consumers, as a further result, experience improved health," he writes.

Only a fraction of people say they read those labels, and science shows that even those folks are overstating their reading activity. Most of us don't pay attention; we know what we like and we buy it.

Nor do Americans necessarily understand the labels.

“A survey conducted in 2012 by the International Food Information Council Foundation also indicates that consumers struggle to understand food labels,” Marlow writes. “Most Americans (52 percent) concluded that figuring out their income taxes was easier than knowing what they should and should not eat to be healthier.”

The evidence that people read and understand labels, and then change their habits, is even more scarce.

“True success is when nudges improve personal health,” writes Marlow. “Improved health is a much higher bar for success that nudge theorists should shoot for. So far, the connection between nutritional nudges and improved health is more of a hope than a well-examined theory. The bottom line is that nudge theorists have a lot of work to do. Their enthusiasm over their ability to design nutritional nudges that translate into improved health lacks theoretical and empirical support.”