

SOCIAL NORMS

NO IMPACT

People often do not save money for a rainy day. Researchers partnered with a Dutch retail bank ING to design an [initiative](#) to boost emergency savings among its customers by using a social norms message. The social norms message said 'You have a lower buffer with us than most other ING clients in your neighborhood'. Whilst the initiative boosted intentions to save and customers often read the communication, it had no impact on increasing savings.

MARGINAL IMPACT

The UK Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BEIS) wanted to encourage businesses to access a growth voucher. Businesses could apply for a voucher to gain partial payment for business advice. BEIS and HMRC [sent](#) five different messages to 600,000 SMEs. The social norms message said 'Thousands of businesses are applying for growth vouchers' but it only increased click through rates by 0.16 percentage points - from 1.56% in the control to 1.72% in the social norms messaging.

A [trial](#) conducted by the World Bank in Poland testing a series of different nudge messages to encourage people to pay their taxes found many other messages performed better than a social norms message. The most effective message had a threatening tone: "So far, we have thought of your payment delay to be accidental. However, if you disregard this notice, we will consider it an intentional choice of yours and we will treat you as a dishonest taxpayer. As part of the execution procedures, we can, for example, block your bank account, salary, and, in addition, you will have to cover all execution expenses that arise." This message prompted over 48% of recipients to pay their taxes, compared to just 40% in the control group who received the standard letter. The social norms message which said "According to our records, [8] out of 10 residents in [region of taxpayer] have already paid their income tax for 2015. You are part of a minority that has not yet fulfilled that duty." Whilst this message led to a 3 percentage point uplift in the proportion of people paying, it was the second least effective message.

VARYING IMPACT

Employees often fail to set aside money every month for their retirement. A Fortune 500 company wanted to [increase enrolment](#) and contributions into retirement savings plans using a social norms message: "Join the 87% of 25-29 year old employees at our company who are already enrolled in our 401(k) plan." Although these mailings led to a dramatic increase in enrolment overall, the effects were unequal across employees. Low wage workers on the shop floor were discouraged by the information about their peers; they found it demotivating to know that so many of their peers were already saving for retirement.

MAJOR IMPACT

Antibiotics are often over-prescribed. Over half of prescriptions are for conditions such as viral infections that antibiotics do not effectively treat. Over-prescribing antibiotics not only increases healthcare costs, but can also increase antibiotic-resistant bacteria. An [initiative](#) to reduce unnecessary prescribing among doctors leveraged social norms messaging. Doctors within a particular region were ranked according to an "inappropriate antibiotic prescribing rate." A monthly email informed doctors whether they were a "top performer" (those with the lowest rates of unnecessary prescriptions) or "not a top performer" (everyone else). The email to those who weren't considered top performers compared a doctor's proportion of inappropriate prescriptions to that of the top performers. Those shown how they compared to top performers decreased inappropriate prescription rates from 19.9% to 3.7%.