In a recent 60 Minutes interview, Lesley Stahl asked Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg why the company had signs all over its office that said “hack.” Zuckerberg said hacking was a positive attribute and simply an approach to find a shortcut to solve a complex problem. He also said people like Ben Franklin and Thomas Jefferson were the original hackers.

As such, I encourage city and state officials to think about how to hack their city or state. Think like a hacker. How do you construct outreach and services to get the behavior you want? In the end, that’s your agency’s mission and there are specific actions you want citizens to take (make payments on time, weatherize homes, etc.).

This line of thinking has become popular, going by names such as behavioral psychology, persuasive technology and behavioral economics. One seminal book, *Nudge*, described the power of default and how it’s hard to change behavior. So with public policy decisions, rather than default at a setting that can hurt people (e.g., 0 percent contribution in your retirement), you default at something good (i.e., 5 percent contribution in your retirement). This book is so influential in public policy thinking that President Barack Obama named co-author Cass Sunstein to his administration.

There are a few cities already embracing this thinking. Manor, Texas, partnered with the Stanford Persuasive Technology Lab to create an incentive structure that gives citizens points for city-related activities that they exchange for rewards.

I encourage cities and states to start thinking of how they can hack their agencies. Here are my top three suggested hacks:
1. Make people want to do it. Often governments approach citizens straightforwardly — you should complete your census form, go to town hall, file your taxes or we’ll punish you. Instead, think like marketers; make people want to do it. Make it an enjoyable experience that’s personally rewarding and fun.

2. Make it easy. People are busy and generally lazy. So if you want them to do something, it must be super-easy. The one-click Facebook “like” button has 100 times more use than the old two-click share button. The one-click Amazon.com shopping led to hundreds of millions of dollars in new shopping. Yes, because that extra click is so painful. One easy idea at the city level is parking meter tickets, which are usually unpaid because people forget and they’re time-consuming. St. Petersburg, Fla., made it super-easy for motorists to pay parking tickets using a pay-by-phone service.

3. Remind, remind, remind. In a dream world, you tell people something once and they fully remember it and dutifully execute your request. In the real world, everyone is busy and has many commitments. You may ask me to pay my parking tickets or renew my driver’s license, and I’m excited to do it, but the next second I’m distracted by a phone call. Thus, the need to: remind, remind, remind. Think about it in politics, when it’s nearing Election Day, I think I received 12 phone calls, 25 e-mails, four text messages, seven Facebook updates and eight tweets to say, “Go vote, stupid.”

Why? As a recovering sociology major, I understand the ease to ignore engagement, communication, marketing and collaboration. It sounds less serious than fixing JavaScript errors and securing infrastructure.

In the end, doing these things well reduces costs and increases revenue. All it takes is a little creativity and a little hacking.

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