

Mark Your Dog's Good Behavior

a.k.a, secret to dog training

We are going to talk about a training technique called operant conditioning. For sake of simplicity, we will refer to it as Marker training. It is probably the most widely accepted method of training animals today. In a nutshell, it is a way of communicating with our dogs so we can get the behavior we would like.

If there were a golden rule for humans to follow in order to get good behavior from our dogs, it would probably be “pay attention to Fido when he is good”. This in itself can communicate to your Fido just what good behavior is.

Teach Fido English

Before we go into the marker training technique, I should say a little something about what Fido already knows. Fido knows how to sit, come, down, etc. He has learned that on his own. What we need to teach Fido is the English. Not the whole language of course, but the words you would like Fido to know. He will learn many other words whether you want him to or not. Much of this can be learned without lures, treats or other training aids. Simple. When Fido offers a behavior, give it a word. For example, when Fido sits on his own, say the word “sit”. In a short period of time, when you say “sit”, he will sit, unless he doesn't want to. But we are going to get to that. The important thing to keep in mind is, say/signal the command at the instant the dog offers the behavior and say it only once! It only confuses Fido to say sit before he is sitting, if he doesn't know the command.

Examples of behaviors that we can assign a word to are: sit, down, come, stand, bark, outside, inside, etc. Any behavior that Fido offers, you can give it a word. These are the kind of words/behaviors that can be taught with little training effort because they already know the behavior, so we just need to associate a command/signal with the behavior.

I have assigned words like “do your stuff” when my dog relieves herself. Another is “take a bow” when she stretches with her rump in the air. Ok, so we know one way to teach Fido numerous commands. But how do we get Fido to do things reliably, almost instantly, accurately, and under most conditions? Read on.

Mark and Reinforce Correct Behavior

It is a scientific fact that reinforced behavior is repeated. So, if we were to reward Fido when he does what we want him to do, we should expect him to likely do it again on request. We do this by first, accurately communicating to him the behavior we are about to reinforce and then rewarding that behavior. Rewards can be food, toy, praise, play, etc. It depends on the exercise being performed, personality of the dog and so forth.

How we administer the reward is the key. Fido needs to understand exactly which behavior is being rewarded. We communicate that by instantly marking the correct behavior when it is offered. We then follow that with a reward. We do not offer the reward until after we have clearly

marked the behavior. The mark is either a sound or a word. Using a clicker is probably the most accurate marker. However, many trainers are quite successful using a word for the marker. So as an example, if our marker were the word “yes” and the reward we are using is food, we would say to Fido “sit” and as soon as Fido sits, we would instantly say “yes!” and then follow it with a treat. However, before the marker can be effective, it needs to be charged. Read on.

Charge Your Marker

Now before we can effectively use our marker in training, we need to give value to our marker. This is quite easy. Get a bowl of tiny really good treats, such as, cooked diced meat. Anything that your dog likes will work. It is best to position the treats out of the view of Fido. Say your marker word and then give Fido a treat. Do not reach for the treat until you have clearly said “yes”. The reason is, when dogs are given a physical and a verbal cue simultaneously, the dog will pick up on the physical cue. Reaching for a treat is a physical cue. Wait approximately 10 seconds and then say it again followed by a treat. Do about 20 repetitions of this. Perform this exercise several times throughout the day in different locations. In a short period of time, your marker will have value. Whenever Fido hears it, he will know something good is about to happen! It is this anticipation that makes this type of training so powerful.

Using Your Marker

Mark a behavior only once. Do not say “yes yes yes”. Say it once the instant Fido offers the behavior you want. The reward does not need to be instantaneous, but the mark does. For instance, you command Fido to “down” when he is 20 feet away from you. The instant he drops, you say yes. He now knows something good is about to happen! At this point, you can walk over to him and give him a reward. Or maybe you whip out his toy from your back pocket. Or maybe you run up to Fido with lots of praise and give him a good belly rub. Make your rewards exciting! None of this boring “good dog” stuff. Give him a “That’s my Fido!!!”. Be genuine. Let Fido know how thrilled you are, that he knows and does what you tell him to do. When you use praise as a reward, be sincere. If you are not, Fido will know!

Engagement

Keep Fido engaged. Training sessions should be Fido’s happiest memories. This should be the special times that you set aside to be with Fido. This is that time when Fido is given so many opportunities to get the things that he wants. The second you say “Ready?”, Fido should look at you with an expression that says “you bet I’m ready, what do you want me to do?!!!”. When you get that look, you will be thrilled. That is your reward!!!