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Operant Conditioning - Clicks and Target Sticks

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I had an exciting meeting earlier this month. One of my clients told me that Karen Pryor had moved her publishing company from Washinton State to Waltham Mass. For those of you who've not heard of Karen, she is the guru of clicker training, a positive reinforcement method of animal training which had it's birth in the schooling of dolphins. She is also the author of my husband's favorite book, "Don't Shoot the Dog". Michael loves that book, not because he's ever even tried to train an animal - they all refuse to take him seriously the same as the kids - but because he believes it holds the truths to understanding why individuals of any species act the way they do. Karen underlined that observation herself. "Don't Shoot the Dog" is coming out soon in a new edition and it includes a rather wonderful story. A lady involved in one of Karen's research projects had three year old twins who hated to go to bed, and were often up until after 11pm. She decided to try clicker training them, not only to establish an earlier bed-time but also during the day to establish other desired behaviors. All went well, and within three days bedtime had moved consistently back to before 9 pm. Sometimes the lady's mother babysat her grandchildren, and the lady explained to her the use of the clicker when getting the twins to bed. All continued to go well. Granny then came into the possession of an unruly, large, rescue dog. She told her daughter that she was at her whit's end as the dog didn't do one thing she told it. Her daughter immediately suggested clicker training, to which her mother replied, "I can see how it works with children, but how could you possibly use it to train a dog?"

If you think about it, training dolphins with the traditional methods we've used for dogs would be impossible. Those methods relied heavily on punishing dogs when they did something we didn't want. How would you punish a dolphin, short of sending an electric current through his pool, which might be the end of him? Punishment rarely works as well anyway because all species learn better if they are told what to do, not if they are told what not to do. Into all our lives the negative will fall, and our dog will learn just as quickly as we do that if he touches his nose to a hot stove it's not something he wants to repeat. When we are the ones meting out the punishment though the timing is rarely as exquisite as in that kind of cause



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and effect learning. By the time most people jerk the choke collar of the forging dog, he may have fallen into step again beside them, and gets the idea that's not what is wanted and forging is OK. Even more extreme is the owner who comes home and finds his young - or not so young - dog has had an "indiscretion" on the carpet. If the owner lets loose his irritation there will be a communication problem. The owner is yelling because the dog peed or pooped inside, but for the dog the translation says, "Dad gets mad if there is pee or poop on the floor." The fact he caused it to be there is not a part of the situation in his mind.

We had a Westie owner who brought his young dog to us for house training problems convinced the dog was doing it to him on purpose to spite him for leaving the dog home alone. Well, having worked our usual wonders, the dog quickly became a model citizen, at least in the house-breaking department. Several years later he got a new pup, and arrived home (no he didn't believe in crates) and found further indiscretions. However, it was not the young pup who slouched guiltily away but the old dog, who was not responsible for the mess at all, but still remembered his early lesson that pee and/or poop on the floor when Dad got home made him mad. Young pup was happily jumping all over Dad without a care in the world.

Back to our dolphin, if punishment won't work what will? Theoretically if we could dangle a fish over his nose we could get him to do what we want. That's fine if what we want is for him to swim around the edge of his pool after us, but not many people would pay to see him do that. They want to see him jump through hoops and dunk basketballs across the other side of the pool. We need some way to tell our dolphin that he's doing something we like when he's at a distance from us, and that's where the clicker comes in. In the case of the dolphins they used whistles but it's the same principle. The click says immediately that's what I want, and the actual reward will be forthcoming at a later time.

The first step in clicker training is to establish the link in the dog's (or any other animal or human) mind between the clicker and an actual reward for good behavior. That bit takes only a minute or two in most cases. The usual reward most trainers use is food, but you can also use hugs, pats, praise, a game of ball or frisbee or anything else the dog likes, or mix rewards. Take your dog somewhere there are few distractions at first. Click him (to get clickers see the address at the end of the article) and give him a tiny food reward. Repeat. Once he starts looking at the clicker rather than the hand



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that feeds him, you know he has made the connection. Next think of a behavior you would like him to learn, it can be almost anything, but it's best if it's something simple he does naturally to start with, for example sit. Traditionally sit was trained by pulling up on the collar, and pushing down on the butt. Some obliging dogs went ahead and sat, others felt the pressure and resisted it. OK so as long as you had your hands on Fido you might be able to get him to sit, but could he generalise this and sit when so ordered if he was at a distance from his owner? Often times the answer was "no". Next came the idea that if you took a food treat and gradually raised it over and behind his head he'd have to sit. Try it, it works quite well for most dogs. Ruffian, the latest Beardie at Fivefields, believes it's an indication she should stand on her hind legs and mug your hand. Once again though, it doesn't work if you want the dog to sit when he's on the other side of a busy street from you. Still, as we'll see later, it is an idea we can certainly incorporate in our training. Now the dog understands click = reward, either wait for him to sit on his own, or try and speed it up with the "target" (food or otherwise) over his head. Click and reward. After a few repetitions he'll figure out that sitting gets a click and a bit of food. Now you can say "sit" or give him a hand signal command and when he sits click and reward. A dog that is rewarded each time he does something tends to become less quick in his response and more slovenly in the execution. Once he has the idea, be selective and only reward "better" performances, or require him to hold the behavior longer. Do not reward the dog unless you have given the voice or hand command for "sit" at this point. If he sits without your asking you can tell him he's wrong ("uh-uh" or "wrong" or use a different noise signal - I like a duck call).

To train your dog at a distance it is useful to introduce the target stick. Actually, you can use anything as a target, and the stick can be any stick you don't have to purchase a special one, but the target sticks sold for training are straight wands about 3' long which fold up when not in use. Using your clicker get the dog to bump his nose at the rubber tip at the end of the target stick (we often use a dressage whip with horses, and they can bump either end depending on owner choice so perhaps I should say the designated end). Again use the clicker, and at first reward any attempt to touch the stick and gradually hone into the rubber end. Actually, for the purpose of training it may even be better if instead of physically touching the stick the dog just focuses on the end. Once he's doing this consistently introduce the command "touch" or "focus". The target stick then tells the dog where you want his nose to point. To sit, lift the point of the stick



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slightly over his head and move it back, the dog doesn't have to be closer than three feet from you. To teach heel, carry the stick beside you at first where you want your dog's nose. Gradually choke up on the stick, the dog's focus rises, he looks at your hip. He has the command "heel" and you can continue to choke up on the stick and finally lose it entirely. One of the first target exercises is to get your dog to spin a circle after the target stick to get the idea of following.

If you want to teach drop on recall put the stick flat on the ground between you and the dog. Place the dog in a stay, and walk to the other side of the stick. Call him, as he comes, give the command "touch", as he gets the idea replace "touch" with "down".

Basically you can use these two simple tools to train your Beardie to do just about anything. The only limitation is your imagination and his dexterity. There's nothing magical about clickers. You could use a different bridge between a behavior and a reward. One that we've all employed is praise. The trouble is we don't always use it with sufficient discrimination. In the vet's office Fido is quivering with fear, we pet him, "It's OK, there, there, good dog." Well guys we've just reinforced his fear. Not only have we told him he's a good boy for being afraid, our tone of anxiety tells him he really should be upset, after all Mom's shaking in her paws too. The dog is running off into the distance and we're calling, "Here Fido, good boy," as we grit our teeth and our body language says "I'm going to shake the stuffing out of you if I ever get my hands on you, you good-for-nothing @\$%!" If we only said "Good Boy," when he really did do something we wanted and in the way we wanted, it'd be just fine, but we don't.

In the obedience ring clickers are taboo. Resourceful owners have used a sniff (hard if you really do have a runny nose) or even a name other than their dog's own name, as successful bridges. As long as they make you think about what you are reinforcing almost any bridge will work. Clickers are nice because they are an unusual sound and one that carries well. (One of the Chilean Olympic show-jumping team quickly learned to use the clicker to train his horses. One day he watched his daughter ride a beautiful round from the distant stands, as she pulled her horse up, she heard her father click her. She nearly fell off her horse with amusement, but reports that since then she's not felt nearly as much tension in the ring.)



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Click and treat training is fun for us and our dogs, and sessions are best kept short so we can fit them in at any time during the day. You can use it to work on obedience, conformation handling, agility, herding, fly-ball or just plain making your dog a more wonderful all round companion for you and your family (including standing for grooming and having his nails done). In the spring I'm hoping to have weekly open-house agility sessions, where we can not only introduce all our Beardies to this fun sport, but discuss other issues of concern to members. If you start clicking now, your Beardie will learn much better, targeting really makes it easier to figure out the obstacles.

In this article I have barely been able to skim the surface, but Sunshine Books is coming out about now with a new book which looks wonderful - Karen showed me the galleys. It's called Clicker Training for Obedience - Shaping Top Performance Positively and it's written by Morgan Spector. You can order it, clickers, target sticks and a whole lot of other neat books and video tapes from them at 1-800-47CLICK, fax 1-781-398-0761, or pay them a visit at 49 River St, Waltham, upstairs and in back of the Duncan Donuts store.

(ED note). There are many other materials available on clicker training. See the various dog book catalogues.

Thought for the month: Parvovirus can survive in the soil for over 12 months. Dogs receiving MLV (modified live virus) vaccine for parvo or any other disease shed the virus in their feces, where it can live in the soil and possibly affect the immunocompromised or very young.