

TRAINING

MARKING BEHAVIOR

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Over the years I've used many, many methods of training. I have what I call a Rolodex of training ideas that I go through for any given training issue. If some method of training isn't working I'll flip through my mental Rolodex and pull out the next method I believe will help me communicate with the dog on the dog's level and in the dog's language. I may flip the "cards" in the mental Rolodex while I'm training so to the outside observer it may not be clear what I'm doing at that moment. But generally I'm flipping through my Rolodex and back tracking in training to achieve a specific task or a part thereof. But there is a method to my madness. It's all about communication with the dog. It's about helping the dog to understand and comprehend exactly what I am explaining to the dog.

In herding I have found marking behavior to save me time and accelerate the learning curve in my dogs. It is a "short cut" method to better understanding.

When I start training a dog I "say" very little to a dog. Communication is almost totally through body language. The dog is required to "see/feel/respond" to my body language, whether the dog's on lead or off lead. My goal is total respect and awareness from the dog. To some trainers this is called "focus" training. The dog doesn't have to "stare" at me but they do have to be totally responsive and aware of what I'm doing (physical cues/body language). An example of total awareness of the handler is a loose leash. My dogs are never allowed to get the leash tight UNLESS we are doing a training exercise that requires a tight leash. I walk along and my dogs never pull on the leash. If they do then they are disrespecting me and there will ALWAYS be consequences for the disrespect. Off leash I have a "stay here" command in addition to a "heel" command. These commands are totally different. The off leash "stay here" requires the dog to maintain contact with me at all times and stay within a close distance, e.g., usually around 50 feet but can be closer or further away. The dog is required to keep "checking back" with me. If I am in the pasture and go the opposite direction away from

the dog, the dog is required to make the directional correction without me having to voice an additional command. It is the dog's responsibility to maintain that contact; not my responsibility; same as on leash. If the dog loses the contact there will be consequences to pay.

People do not seem to realize that dogs are extremely visual. Dogs perceive and react to subtle differences in facial expression, eye contact, body carriage, intensity of movement and mood (sadness, anger, happiness). The dog translates and reads, reacts and responds to the above "body language" using their experiences and relationship with the handler. The dog's appropriate or inappropriate response is directly related to our consistency in using the same body language to mean the same thing in our training. We humans may not even be aware we are physically cuing/talking to the dog.

Dogs react to their environment on a survival level. A dog's reaction is to lessen stress or pressure on himself or herself. Their actions will reduce pressure they feel and is to put them into their own comfort zone.

Some humans have more sensitivity or awareness of their surroundings than others. They may notice other people's physical traits and characteristics or moods more readily. These people may walk a wide path around a person they perceive as a threat or someone that makes them uncomfortable; while another person may not perceive the same threat level and walk a straight line past the same person. Imagine a dog being a thousand fold more sensitive than the most sensitive human. To increase communication with the dog, a trainer must be aware of everything that affects the dog, e.g., the trainer's own body language and anything in the dog's environment that the dog perceives as pressure.

As training progresses and the dog willingly gives me their attention and shows total respect and awareness of me, I begin to communicate with the dog on a verbal level. At this point I am "teaching" the dog "verbal cues".

So, how do we, as trainers, communicate with our dogs in a language they understand AND listen for? A language that is not perceived or associated with a "correction" or as "bad"; a language that helps the dog understand and respond appropriately to what the trainer wants. A language, which cause and effect is to modify the dog's behavior without any negative connotation to the dog.

Answer: We "mark" behavior.

The greatest problem with marking behavior is the human. Any miscommunication is always the human's fault. Period.

I have "trainers" tell me they "mark" behavior all the time. Yet, they "correct" their dog with a "No". A "No" may be followed by the dog getting a beating or a tongue-lashing or ANYthing that the dog considers a stressor/bad/correction e.g., pressure.

This is MY METHOD of "MARKING BEHAVIOR".

I use the words "YES" and "NO" as markers. Not "good dog" or jumping up and down and cheerlead the dog. You can "encourage" the dog with a Good Dog periodically when you are sequencing a behavior and asking the dog to repeat a move over and over. You start by marking the behavior with a Yes exactly when the behavior occurs. Then you mark the behavior after two sequences with a Yes. You can encourage the dog where the first marker used to be, with a Good Dog, then mark the end of the sequencing with a Yes and possibly a treat. Something to give the marker a little umph! Just a simple marker of "YES" and "NO" though. I do NOT use a clicker. I use my voice. It's handy. It's always available. As a woman I may overuse it but then again, I'd blow up if I couldn't talk. At least, that's what my husband tells me.

A marker is not repetitive in nature. It is a marker to mark a specific action from the dog that is appropriate/accurate/correct or inappropriate/wrong/mistaken. MY markers may be for ONE STEP in the correct direction. "YES". They may be for ONE STEP in the incorrect direction. "NO". They are used to BUILD confidence in the dog and to BUILD a line of communication. The dog HAS to perceive the marker as a cue and modify its behavior according to the cue given.

The dog ALSO has to have a good grasp on the alternate behavior that is being requested. It has to be TAUGHT the correct behavior before a "NO" marker can be used. How can you mark a behavior with a "NO" without having a clear picture of what is correct behavior? You can't. So for e-v-e-r-y "NO" marker there is always a corresponding "YES" marker for the correct response to a given command.

This philosophy in training has morphed from my days using the Koehler method of training. In one of his seminars I learned that "for every correction there is praise". This was not meant as a marker tool back then. It was meant to maintain "attitude" in the dog, which marking behavior also preserves. You cannot train a dog

that is sullen and pouting. This method of training taught me that the dog depends #1 on body language and #2 can accept correction or negative feedback and WILL continue to work and try to find the right response IF it is taught correctly. I also learned that "waiting" for the correct behavior is wasted time. I learned to TRAIN correct behavior then EXPECT it.

Marking behavior takes the place of micromanagement through commands. It allows the dog to THINK about what it heard and then gives it a chance to respond correctly without any negative connotation. If done correctly the dog understands that it has taken a wrong step, e.g., I give the Away command and the dog starts to take a Come Bye command. I mark the FIRST wrong step, then keep quiet to allow the dog to think about what it is doing. If I get another wrong step then I will mark it with a "NO" then repeat the command to HELP the dog understand what the Marker was related to.

A while back I was working an older dog the owner wanted me to trial again to finish her AHBA herding championship. I hadn't worked the dog in a couple of years. The dog knows and understands MY METHOD of marking behavior. At age 10 she could be temperamental and ignored me on occasion. :o) Great dog but herding was not her greatest joy. She does and did, however, have exemplary work ethic. That means she does what she is told to do and understands that she has no choice but to work and to work well. The dog has proved her worth both in the pasture, in pens and in the trialing arena. (Yes, she now has her AHBA Championship.)

In brushing off the rough edges years after retirement, we were doing extremely advanced herding exercises. The dog is spot-on perfect. Then she commits the ultimate sin of simply ignoring a sheep that left the herd. I can SEE her thinking that it is just too much effort and she's going to ignore that sheep. She takes ONE step in the wrong direction and I say a stern "NO". She looks at me and wonders if I am talking about that sheep or something else. She takes another wrong step, still intending to leave the sheep behind, and I mark that wrong step with another "NO". She looks at me, looks back over her shoulder at the other sheep and I instantly mark the "look" with a "YES". I can SEE her say to herself, "sh*t", then she falls back and fetches the sheep she was trying to ignore. I do NOT step in and give a flank command or any other command to micromanage the dog. She KNOWS what is wrong and I'm waiting for her to fix it; thus LETTING her work instead of MAKING her cover. Big difference here.

The dog and I are communicating the whole time. In many sports the dog HAS to work with intelligence and without

the handler telling the dog every step to take. I could have just sent her back for the sheep and taken over for the dog by issuing command after command after command. But this is an advanced dog that knows better and is just jacking around instead of working at her true potential; advanced. In “marking” the behavior (ignoring the sheep that escaped and trying to just work the sheep she still has) I have told her that her behavior is not acceptable. By not giving her another command (knowing she already knew the correct behavior) I have told her that she needs to think about what she is doing. I have NOT made it personal (gotten mad at the dog and let her know it). I have not taken over by issuing commands, which will make a dog quit working because they see no point in trying if you are just going to tell them every step to take. I allowed her to work it out instead of micromanaging her every move. I did NOT allow her to continue to be wrong. I had also TRAINED her what the proper behavior was before expecting it.

Many trainers use “NO” as a negative connotation. They use No in the context of, “No, you are a bad dog.” The word itself becomes personal to the dog and is associated with the context of “bad dog”. It becomes an “emotional” response to a lose/lose scenario for the dog. Many people use “No” for bad behavior and most of the time it is an emotional response by the human. Does it really teach anything in that context?

I “mark” with both “YES” and “NO”. The “Yes” may be for one step or a routine. It is ONLY a marker. It is NEVER used in anger and it is NEVER used as an emotional release on my part. It is simply a marker for a specific action taken (or not taken) by the dog.

In working my dogs in protection I will use “YES” to mark a specific action. Bite and hold, for instance. Since my dogs are very sensitive to a loose leash I used markers to overcome their hesitation to pull on the lead during agitation. When they lunged at the agitator I marked it with a “Yes”. When they backed away from the agitator I marked that action with a “No”. Since they are used to markers they quickly began to listen and understand what I wanted. They also were quick to respond to verbal cues and stay “soft minded” toward any command given. Because they were comfortable with verbal cues they also were more focused on the agitator while remaining “soft minded” toward me.

Marking behavior is NOT commanding a dog. It is simply taking an action performed by the dog and marking it with a verbal cue. It allows the dog to remain focused. It allows the dog to THINK for itself. It gives the dog confidence by allowing the trainer to communicate with the

dog on a step-by-step basis, if necessary, as to any action the dog is taking. It takes emotion out of training and lessens the impact of emotion on the dog. The dog doesn’t perceive the handler as being mad or upset. The dog simply perceives any given action is correct or incorrect. It motivates the dog to modify its behavior toward a pre-trained response.

If I’m training the dog and the dog truly doesn’t know what to do to BE CORRECT then the “NO” marker allows me to communicate that the given action is wrong and I WILL IMMEDIATELY GIVE A VERBAL CUE AS TO THE CORRECT RESPONSE I WANT. I may have to physically SHOW the dog the correct response. But the “NO” cue allows the dog to perceive my action as HELPING the dog, not correcting it.

This type of verbal marking of behavior allows me to tell the dog that what it’s doing is wrong but wait for my next command and LISTEN. It also builds a ton of confidence in a dog. They don’t “worry” about being wrong. They also EXPECT your help, not your derision.

How many times have we been training our dog and the dog is refusing to obey the command. It is trying to do what IT perceives is the correct option. In herding we call this “Intelligent Disobedience” and unfortunately the dog is usually right. But if you need to break the dogs focus, the “NO” marker will “break the dog’s concentration” for the millisecond needed to remind the dog to LISTEN to my command. It ALLOWS the dog to understand that TO ME whatever action the dog is taking is NOT what I want and that I KNOW the dog is disagreeing with me but “too bad, so sad” do what I say anyway. It allows a “discussion” between the dog and me on a supersonic level and for me to explain that I understand what the dog is trying to do but do it MY way THIS time.

Sometimes I have a dog that is “on the muscle”. The dog is being hard to handle and almost out-of-control. The “NO” marker allows me to “break the dog’s focus” for just that split second I need to regain control. Being “on the muscle” is an action that CAN be marked.

I have also used “NO” for what the dog is THINKING about doing. (Yeah, we’ve all seen that evil glint in our dog’s eyes.) Both dog and I KNOW what the dog is thinking. I’ll mark it with a “NO”. I’ve even marked a dog thinking about dog fighting with a “No, don’t even think about it.” I’ve marked the thought of chasing that cat or squirrel. The dog’s whole body relaxes and they’ll roll over on a hip and turn their head away from the offending dog, animal or circumstance. This is a quiet “marker” of a behavior (tensing of muscles or a focused

glare in the dog's eye so you aren't really marking a thought but a body posture in the dog). I then mark with a "YES" when the dog relaxes. Yes, you can use "markers" on something as miniscule as eye movement and the dog understands the markers that well.

"YES" and "NO" can be the greatest tools for building a line of communication with your dog IF you use them as markers and not as corrections or bastardize the "YES" marker into cheerleading verbiage.

Training is ALL ABOUT COMMUNICATION! It is not a one-way street. The dogs I own and those I train for friends all respond with better attitude and better work ethic when I "mark" behavior. It allows the dog freedom in work, which translates as better work ethic and a happier dog. It actually allows me to remain in constant contact with my dog without interfering in his work.

NOPE! It's not clicker training though you can use a clicker if you want to mark a "Yes", but I generally need by hands for something else. I don't "wait" for a behavior. I TRAIN it. I believe in correction and praise. I believe in making the dog responsible for its own actions instead of me being responsible. By marking behavior I get closer and closer to the ideal I perceive; the dog and myself speaking the same language. It IS a 2-way street. Thus, I use both lanes on that highway to better communication.

In marking behavior the faster your dog becomes "verbal" the better. I try to phase out body language as soon as possible as it will slow the learning process and the dog will use it as a crutch. Marking behavior allows me to wean the dog from body language sooner.

It's pretty simple. The better you communicate the better team you and your dog will be.

The ONLY problem with marking behavior is TIMING. You gotta get that timing perfect! If you mark too late then the dog truly doesn't know what behavior/action you are trying to mark. One of the methods I use to improve timing is to stand outside the arena and watch other dogs work. I verbally (out loud) mark their behavior as I watch them. It becomes muscle memory/habit when you do it often enough. But don't fret. If your timing is off. Down the dog and tell them Good Dog. Then start again. They forgive all. Just do better next time.

Enjoy training and best of luck.

Pat Taylor

Here are a few Patisms for your toolbox....

- *Marking behavior is not a motivational tool. It's a communication tool.*
- *It doesn't matter whether a dog is wrong or right in its response to a command, as long as it is trying to obey that command. What matters is whether or not YOU can communicate to the dog what the appropriate response is to any given command so the dog knows when it is right.*
- *Cheerleading equals disruption of concentration and focus in the dog, thus, degrading quality of understanding in the dog.*