

## METHOD OF TRAINING

### Marker Training

The technical term for this method of training is Operant Conditioning. This is the same method of training used by professional animal trainers around the world. I believe that any animal that can be trained would benefit from operant conditioning. Marker Training is the same thing as operant conditioning, but we use this term because it more correctly describes what it is we are trying to achieve. With marker training (the use of verbal markers) we are marking a moment in time when your dog was correct or incorrect. This type of training bridges the gap between dog and human language. Using marker training we are able to open a clear line of communication that your dog has the capability of connecting with.

Once your dog has an understanding of marker training, each time you give a "mark" it will be like taking a snap shot of what your dog at that time. Your dog will remember exactly what he was doing at the moment they heard the "mark" and received a reward. This allows us to more accurately pinpoint fine details in our training. It also helps the dog more clearly understand what it is we are asking of them.

Dogs are associative learners, and with this type of training we take advantage of mother natures own inherent education techniques. With operant conditioning, dogs form an association between a behavior and immediate effect, the effect can be either good or bad.

This is how dogs gauge if a behavior is worth repeating. If the outcome was good then they are more likely to repeat that behavior.

You will find that your dog will start to offer behaviors that he knows have earned him a "mark" and reward in the past. This is called "anticipation", this is a wonderful thing, it means your dog is enjoying working with you and is actively trying to figure out what you are looking for. He has become OPERANT or active in the training process and is communicating back with you. NEVER correct your dog for anticipating what you are asking. We want our dogs to be great problem solvers and to attempt to solve without us telling them what to do every time. If your dog is not delivering the correct behavior, simply give the "negative marker" ("nope") and wait for your dog to think through the exercise. This is called shaping the exercise.

To many people rush in to rescue the dog when they look confused. If you are sure the dog understands the exercise simply wait. If your not sure he understands or think he is genuinely confused then back your training up and go through the training again, this time split the exercise into smaller segments and offer more physical cues.

It is simply not necessary to get angry or correct the dog for these types of mistakes. If we do this will force our dog into a state of mind called "learned helplessness". In turn that will cause our training to halt and damage the relationship between human and K-9.

Operant conditioning is the use of consequences (both positive and negative) to modify or shape a behavior or action. These consequences will reinforce the preceding behavior.

When a behavior is inconsequential (ignored) most of the time, it will occur with less frequency. Unless it is self-reinforcing, like chasing a squirrel. When you react to a behavior whether positively or negatively you are reinforcing that behavior (good or bad). With that being said, not all behavior should be ignored. Some behaviors that are self-rewarding (the dog is rewarded by the behavior itself) can not be corrected with the use of a secondary reward like food or toy. Counter conditioning is required in repetition to remove these types of behaviors.

## How Does Marker Training Work

In Marker Training we begin by teaching our dog 5 Core Marks. A Marker is a word, sound or phrase that tells the dog when he has gotten a behavior correct or incorrect. Since dogs do not understand English its out job to help them learn what they need. So we start with these 5 core markers. The "YES" is also sometimes referred to as a bridge or primary reward marker. Because it is the marker we use to identify a correct behavior before we even add a cue to it. It is very important to remember that in order for the event marker "YES" to stay powerful and meaningful to your dog it must PREDICT either food or a high value reward such as throwing a ball. However, that being said, its better to stick with food rewards in the beginning so you don't loose focus and so you don't add too much energy to a dog that may not understand training yet. If you deliver the YES by accident you must also deliver the reward. If you are trying to give your dog positive feedback but don't have food rewards on you, simply use the "GOOD" marker instead.

- **"Ready"** Used to cue engagement from your dog, letting him know you need his attention.
- **"YES"** Event marker, lets the dog know the precise moment that he is correct. Predictor of a high value food reward. Also a release.
- **"NO"** Lets the dog know he is not correct, and you will withhold the reward. Your dog must keep trying & working.
- **"GOOD"** Used to give positive feedback that may not be followed by a food reward. Also used to build duration & stability in an exercise.
- **"OKAY"** Used to let your dog know he is free to either come through a door way, play, take a treat, basically its your word to Communicate your approval to proceed.

Markers, once set need to be consistent and not changed to avoid confusion by both dog and handler. In facilities where there are multiple people/handlers caring for and working with the same dog, it is vital to the dogs learning pattern that all handlers use the same vocabulary, and do their best to use the same tone of voice and body language including hand signals. It's important to work together and spot each others interaction with the dog. Valuable critiquing can come from training partners. You may also find gaps in your training when working together. Meaning you will be able to find places where you are not doing things the same way and be able to correct them.

## Charging the mark

The first step to marker training is called "charging or loading the mark". This simply means that we show the dog that the word "YES" has value or means something. Remember your Event Marker needs to have positive sound, tone or inflection.

The process we use to do this is to get your dogs attention, as soon as the dog looks at you or does anything at all that you like, say "YES" and deliver a high value reward. We want the dog to associate the event marker (the word "YES") with receiving a high value reward (preferably a healthy food reward). The marker "YES" becomes the predictor of something good as we spoke of earlier. As soon as your dog hears that mark they know they have done something you like. NOTE: if you give the mark "YES" you MUST deliver the food reward...even if you messed up and gave a mark when you didn't mean to. We call this a "screw up cookie". The great thing about marker training is that when you mess up its no big deal there is no damage done as there would be in old school methods of training.

## Timing of the mark

To achieve operant conditioning, timing of the mark is critical. The mark should be delivered within a half second of the action. The reward (consequence) should follow within about 1.5 to 2 seconds. There should be a gap between the delivery of the mark and the reward. It is crucial that you do not display physical movement before the mark is given, if so you could distract the dog and mark the wrong behavior. You should deliver the mark the instant you see the behavior you are looking for. It is important to remember to be consistent in the tone of your voice when giving a mark. Don't get excited and say "yes, YES, YESSSSS". If you do, then you have possibly just marked three different behaviors and confused your dog. Be sure that you deliver the mark the same way every time.