Using Treats for Positive Reinforcement Training

Many people think that their dog should work for them simply to make them happy. While a few dogs will offer behaviors for simple praise and affection (generally dogs that don't get praise and affection for free) most dogs don't want to work hard for free (would you?). Every dog is an individual and what they find most rewarding will depend on the dogs personality. Some enjoy treats or toys, while others would rather work for a chance at affection or playtime with you. Teaching a dog can be very frustrating for dog and owner if the dog does not understand what he/she is supposed to do. We need to teach them in a way that they can understand.

The use of lure and reward training for new behaviors is a great training tool that creates motivation for the dogs to work for us. The dog learns that they are rewarded with something they find valuable when they do certain behaviors and are more likely to continue that behavior. The problem is that some owners are seduced by how effective training is with the use of food. While it is a great teaching tool, it can also be a crutch if used for too long. For a basic behavior like sit, depending on the individual dog, a lure should only be used 10-15 times, and should then be replaced by an un-baited hand doing the same hand motion and reward with the other hand (treat hidden) once the dog completes the behavior. If your dog is having trouble, just be patient. When your dog finally performs, surprise him with a big reward. Your dog will learn that you may have treats even if he can't see them.

Work at Your Dogs Level

Dogs don't generalize very well. This means that even though your dog knows the down command in your home, he won't necessarily be able to perform or understand the command in a more exciting or distracting situation. It is important that the trainer takes this into consideration and teaches their dog the behavior in many different places and situations. When in a new or particularly difficult situation, you should reward good behaviors heavily and try not to ask too much of your dog (work at your dogs level).

When training, always keep in mind that you should set your dog up to succeed and don't ask for behaviors you don't think they will be able to perform in that situation. Instead, make a mental note and be sure to practice with your dog in that situation or work up to it so that your dog can be successful. If you dog h as never had practice in certain challenging situations, you need to consider that and set them up to succeed by lowering distractions or increasing distance from the distraction.

Weaning your Dog Off Treats

Once your dog is performing behaviors with ease and without a lure, you can begin to move to a **random reinforcement schedule**. Dogs will be more likely to perform behaviors if they think they have a chance at something they enjoy like treats (or toys/praise if your dog values that), so a random reinforcement schedule (give treats every 3rd, 5th, 2nd, 5th etc time) makes them consider doing the behavior for the chance of a reward. It is equally as important to reinforce if your dog doesn't comply when you are sure he/she is capable (low distraction environment, not asking too much of your dog).

You can also begin to use rewards of different values such as chicken, regular treats, and kibble. These are examples of A, B, and C grade rewards. It is a good idea to reward the fastest responses to encourage your dog to give you the behavior quickly. Jackpots can be used when your dog does a behavior exceptionally well. A Jackpot consists of a bunch of tiny treats given rapidly right after the behavior is done. Reward a really fast down with an A grade reward, or a slow sit with a C grade reward or maybe just a pat on the head and "good boy."

Life Rewards

It is important that once your dog knows the behaviors, to integrate them into your everyday life. You can ask your dog for a sit or down before playing a game of fetch or sit and wait at the door before going outside or before receiving dinner. Dog's quickly begin to understand: "If you sit and wait, I will give you dinner. If you don't, I won't!" This type of training is very effective once your dog understands the concept. Not only does your dog learn to work when the owner does not have food in hand, but also begins to learn the relevance of sitting when told.

It helps to put your dog on a "Nothing in Life is Free" program, so that anything your dog finds of value (ex. Walks, dinner, playing, affection) they will be required to work for (sit, down, stay, giving calm behavior etc).