

■ Rewarding the Right Behavior Breeding and Feeding without the Drama



Photo courtesy of Marty Bennett

I have always been an Apple Computer enthusiast and have been reading the biography of Steve Jobs by Walter Isaacson. Jobs and his friend and eventual partner in Apple, Steve Wozniak, were real pranksters in college. This story provides insight into the way that learning and reinforcement works.

Isaacson wrote, "Another prank involved a pocket device Wozniak built that could emit TV signals. He would take it to a room where a group of people were watching TV, such as a dorm, and secretly press the button so that the screen would get fuzzy with static. When someone got up and whacked the set, Wozniak would let go of the button and the picture would clear

up. Once he had the unsuspecting viewers hopping up and down at his will, he would make things harder. He would keep the picture fuzzy until someone touched the antenna. Eventually he would make people think they had to hold the antenna while standing on one foot or touching the top of the set."

Steve Wozniak was training the students. He was providing impeccably timed positive reinforcement for a behavior and, as a result, was able to specifically shape the student's behavior. Of course, their behavior had nothing to do with what was going on with the TV but the students thought it did, and that is the point.

We provide positive reinforcement on a daily basis



to our animals, and unfortunately, we often reinforce the behavior we don't want by providing the reinforcement when the animal is behaving in a way that is not appropriate.

For example, you bring a male alpaca to the breeding pen and he pushes into the gate and rears, and you then open the gate. Because going through the gate to access the female is a powerful reinforcer, you have taught the male in one event that pushing and rearing causes the gate to open. There is a high probability that in the future the male alpaca will express this behavior with the presentation of the female behind a gate, even though the behavior is not necessary to have access to the female.

There are handling tips I could offer: making sure that your halter fits, using a side ring on the nose band of the halter to give yourself more leverage over the animal's balance, and using signals and a light contact instead of muscle to influence the male's behavior on the lead.

Or you could change the set-up, or, as those in the behavior milieu call it, "the antecedent arrangement." Bring the male to the breeding area first or create a gate system that eliminates the need for having the male on a lead at all. Inappropriate behavior by male alpacas is often excused because we assume that a male is not able to control himself when presented with a female. In fact, it is all together likely that we have inadvertently taught the male to exhibit various aggressive or highly excited behaviors because he thinks it results in the chance to breed.

We normally think of feeding animals as just a daily chore—it is much more than that. You are training your animals every time you dole out the hay or

One way to cut down on inappropriately pushy feeding time behaviors is to feed grain or pellets in a separate area. Here the feed is poured into Frisbees set on the ground and then gates are opened to allow animals to get to the food.



Photos courtesy of Susan Brown

Left, these photos show the change in behavior feeding technique can create. When the animals see Susan approaching with food they get excited but she stops and doesn't move toward them until they settle down. In the case of the goats (far right) she waits until they have all four feet on the ground. Above, Ziggy waits patiently until he gets the go ahead before chowing down.

Right, Susan Brown also uses "human feeding time" as a training opportunity. "During dinner on the big communal couch, the dogs (there are seven), all have to have "paws off" when we are eating but we do allow them to be close. They don't bother us... but they know when Richard is done he will save a tiny bit of food for each one and they will all get treats."

grain. Things that happen coincidentally can become linked for your animal. If you are inadvertently training your alpacas to behave badly, then feeding can be a chore in more ways than one! Especially in winter, the animals are understandably anxious to get the food. During the grazing season they are able to get at least some food on their own. In winter they are less active, perhaps cold and therefore more hungry, and completely dependent on us for their food. This makes feeding time loom very large. The animals get excited and they can behave inappropriately. These behaviors might include:

- Spitting at you
- Spitting at each other
- Bumping you
- Stealing the food from your arms
- Blocking your way

If you think that this is just the way alpacas are, or if you think it isn't worth rearranging your system, you might want to think again. It is not just that your animals are spitting, bumping and blocking—if you feed while your animals are behaving this way, you are

reinforcing the behavior. If your animals learn to push and shove you during feeding time, they will use this behavior at other times to get what they want.

Given we have complete control over the way that we provide supplemental food, we can structure these events and accomplish two things 1) prevent our animals from learning and practicing inappropriate behavior, and 2) use the presentation of food to shape behavior.

You can influence behavior based on how and when you deliver the food, but adding a clicker to the process will make it easier for the animals to figure things out. Using feeding time to pair the sound of a clicker with the availability of food is often called "charging the clicker." Click a second or two before you put a flake of hay in the feed bunk. Use a clicker with a wrist coil and it is easy to click as you feed.

One of my misconceptions about clicker training was that lessons needed to be of a certain length, with only one animal in a lesson. Enthusiastic clicker trainers wear a clicker at all times and carry treats in a pouch around their waist, clicking and treating be-



havior they like anytime it is offered. In the course of doing chores, if you catch an animal doing something you like, click and treat right then. The animals will file away that information and begin to learn which behaviors result in positive reinforcement, and you will see more of that behavior.

You can also change the antecedent arrangement. You can create a waiting area for feeding. Herd the animals into the waiting area, put the food out in the feeding area and finally allow the animals into the feeding area. Your animals will willingly go to the waiting area once they figure out that it means that they will get fed. You can go one step further and open the gate only when the animals have settled down. If, when you initially put the feed out, there is a lot of drama and jockeying for position, you can wait until the animals have settled down and then open the gate to the food. In this case you can click and then open the gate to the food.

Another option is to feed in a way that does not teach an animal inappropriate behavior. Use a rolling cart or wheel barrow for feeding hay, instead of carry-

ing it in your arms. In this way, the animals will focus on the hay in the cart and you will not inadvertently teach your animals to push and shove you to get to the food in your arms. This is particular valuable when feeding males. Males are naturally more physical and it is doubly important to teach males that these behaviors are not appropriate with humans.

Once you begin to see how your behavior affects your animals you will be amazed at the possibilities.

Happy handling!

My thanks to Dr. Susan Brown for her help with this article.

For over 25 years, Marty has traveled the world, devoting her professional life to the well-being of camelids and the education of their owners. Her clinics, books, and videos have helped thousands of camelid owners more fully understand, appreciate, and enjoy their animals. Marty and her husband, Brad, operate the Camelidynamics Training Center in Bend, Oregon. She can be reached at marty@camelidynamics.com.