

Clicker Training Your Camelid

by Marty McGee Bennett



This article is a basic introduction to **Event Marker/Clicker Training** along with some of the specific considerations for using the method with camelids. The process of pairing a specific marker with a behavior and then offering some sort of reinforcer is essentially the same, whether you are training a dog, a giraffe, a parrot, or a camelid. In this article I am presenting the basics of the process and some specific information about how to create a good physical set up that will help when working with camelids. There are many fine books on the subject of event marker training and workshops in almost every town for dogs. Learning with dogs is a great way to learn the process. If you are really keen, you can go to a chicken camp. These are 2-6 day trainings with chickens where you learn the mechanics of clicker training and the science behind it. I have attended a chicken camp and found it to be a lot of fun and very helpful. It gives you a LOT of respect for the learning ability of chickens! I also teach a clicker training day or half day as a part of my CAMELIDynamics clinics. Check the workshop information to see if event marker training is on the agenda for the specific workshop you are interested in.

What it is...

Clicker training is actually more properly called Event Marker training. The clicker is only one of many choices for marking a behavior. The key concept is that you are marking a behavior that you will reinforce (usually with food) within a few second of delivering the mark. A reinforcer is something that is meaningful for the ANIMAL and that the animal will work for. There are many options depending on the animal and it is up to you, the trainer, to figure out what is sufficiently important for the animal to stay in the training game and work. Food is the most logical choice but there are other things that camelids find reinforcing. An escape route if they are concerned, TTouch bodywork

if they have learned to appreciate that, or in the case of males access to a female. More information about food options later in this article.

Think of the mark like the shutter of a camera. The mark is delivered as precisely as possible at the moment the desired behavior occurs and the reinforcer is then offered as soon as is practically possible-usually within 1-3 seconds. Markers can be a sound such as a clicker,



whistle or a sound you create with your voice. Marks can also be a visual signal. Whatever your mark is the more consistent it is the better it works. The most important thing is that the animal understands that the mark is going to result in the offer of a desired outcome, again usually food. From this point forward for simplicity's sake I am going to use a clicker as the marker and food as the reinforcer and she, llama or alpaca to refer to the animal.

Charging the Clicker

You can teach your llama or alpaca to make the connection between the clicker and the food by doing what is called charging the clicker or helping the animal student become “clicker-wise.” This process is quite simple—click and then treat (C/T) enough times in a row, usually 5-8 repetitions, that the alpaca or llama begins to expect that the food follows the sound of the clicker. Observe your animal closely looking for indications after the click that your animal is expecting the food. Indications might be a pricking of the ears forward, turning the head moving or in the direction of the handler. The location of the food as it is delivered is important and it should be somewhere that is in neutral territory— as in not in your personal space. Animals should learn to be polite as they eat the food and should wait for it to be offered in a space that is between the handler and the animal.



Teaching a Behavior - The Basics

Once your animal is clicker wise or at least there are indications that the clicker has some relevance, you can begin to pair the delivery of the click with a specific behavior. Once the alpaca or llama begins to figure out that the click and behavior and reinforcer are all related she will begin to deliberately offer the behavior you have marked to get the reinforcer. When it becomes very obvious and consistent that the animal is offering a specific behavior to get the reinforcer it is then time to put the behavior on cue. Putting a behavior on cue means teaching the animal a very specific indicator that is paired with a particular behavior. The verbal cue “sit” means something very specific— it means to a dog that he must arrange his body so that his butt is on the ground and the front legs are still straight. Dog trainers might want even more specificity from the dog— sitting perfectly straight without rolling over to one side on a hip for example— more on changing a behavior in a bit. Cues can be visual or auditory. A cue differs from the clicker in that the clicker is a general indicator that the behavior the animal was performing at the time of the click will be reinforced.

Depending on the training agenda the click is used for many different behaviors. A cue is a request for a *specific* behavior and unless that specific behavior is performed there is no reinforcer offered.



Capturing and Shaping

There are two basic ways to get behavior, you can capture it or shape it. Capturing behavior is when you wait until the exact behavior that you want occurs and then click and reinforce that behavior. This is most useful when you can predict that the desired behavior will happen. Otherwise waiting around for a particular behavior can take a long time! I am hard pressed to come up with an example of capturing a behavior in camelids but one example might be when you enter the barn and an animal naturally gets up to come over and see what

you are doing. You can choose a specific animal and when you walk through the barn door, mark the getting up behavior, when the specific animal gets up. It would be a good idea to choose in advance which part of the getting up sequence you want to capture and then click when that happens. The mark could be delivered when the animal is fully standing or at any time along the way. Once the connection between the specific behavior and the click occurs you can put the behavior on cue. In this case the cue might be “stand up.” The behavior is said to be on cue when the animals stands when you say, “stand up.”

Shaping behavior is when you change a behavior with a series of small approximations from a simple behavior to a more complex one. A good example of shaping is teaching an animal to put a body part on an object this is called “targeting.” Examples of targeting are putting a nose on a flat surface like a frisbee for example or putting a foot on a platform. If you want to capture this behavior it might take a long time for an alpaca to spontaneously put his foot on a small platform. Shaping offers a way from here to there—from simple to more complex or from

general to more specific. Before you can train any behavior it is really important to have a very specific vision of what the finished behavior (the one you will put on cue) looks like. Animals offer a wide variety of nuance and variation in their behavior. This natural variation is in part what makes the process of shaping work, but it can also mean that without a specific plan you may get caught on a side road that will take you away from the behavior you want. These side roads can lead to getting stuck. It is easier to have as clear a path and plan and even then your animal student will throw you some curves. The good news is that event marker training can



never be coercive because the choice to participate is always the animal's.

Targeting... an Example of Shaping a Behavior



Since it is the easiest thing to teach, let's look first at targeting with the nose. You will begin with an animal who is clicker wise. My vision for the finished behavior is to have the animal place his nose ON the target (a plastic frisbee) for a moment with the nose in the center of the frisbee. You can begin the process by bringing the frisbee from behind your back to a place out to the side of your body and then clicking when the animal simply looks in the direction of the frisbee. Click and treat and put the frisbee behind your back again to restart the process. Once you are sure (you would bet someone a hundred dollar bill) that the animal will do the behavior when you provide the opportunity, it is time to

change the criteria for reinforcement. Decide what the next level of approximation will be. It is always good to have a game plan in mind ahead of time. Training on the fly particularly when you are inexperienced can create strange behaviors you don't intend to teach. In the case of targeting, I would suggest holding out for the animal to move his nose closer to the frisbee. Now, when you present the frisbee and the animal does what he was doing before— simply looking in the direction of the frisbee— you don't click or treat but continue to hold the frisbee out to the side. The animal will be momentarily confused and will try to figure out what to do to get the treat. This is where the magic happens. Animals will inevitably and naturally offer variations of the behavior and you will click and treat the variation that moves you towards the ultimate finished behavior. This is why it is important to have some kind of a general plan in mind— so you can be ready to click what you want next.

The art inherent in the science of event marker training is this process of moving the process forward—shaping. Hold out for too big a leap and your student will become discouraged and quit the game, not what you want but NOT the end of the world! The beauty of the process is that mistakes are forgiven and it is an easy thing to simply back up to what was working and reinforce that behavior a couple of times and then make the leap to the next approximation easier. In the case of targeting the animals will often get the idea very quickly and skip many steps and put their noses on the target right away and by all means click and treat that! However there will probably be some flashes of brilliance like this followed by some confusion. Because an animal leapt forward doesn't mean you hold out for this big leap from then on. You may need to go back to some of the in between steps. There are really no mistakes only opportunities to get more information. One very important thing... I am going to put this in bold letters... **when you are clicker training if you click you must always reinforce.** This is the contract that you make with your animal student. There are going to be times when you jump the gun and mis-click you still pay up.

Putting a Behavior on Cue

Once you have taught a finished behavior it is time to put that behavior on cue. This is a pretty simple process. The hardest part is figuring out good cues—ones that are logical, easy to



remember and are distinctive. Remember a cue can be verbal or visual. If you choose a verbal cue it should be a word that is easily recognized and is going to be distinct from other verbal cues. For example in targeting I use the body part rather than the word “target” since I may be teaching an animal to target with other parts of the body. So in the case of targeting with the nose I use the cue “nose.” When putting the behavior on cue, as the animal heads toward the target with his nose I now say NOSE *just before* his nose touches the target AND as the nose actually touches the target I click and then treat. Now it is a matter of creating more and more time and distance between the delivery of the cue and the target. With each

repetition you begin to say the cue earlier in the process— when the animal is further way from the target. You still click and then treat each time the nose touches the target and reinforce. At some stage you could say to an animal that is wandering around perhaps distracted... NOSE and he will look for the target walk some distance to it and touch it with his nose. Now you know that the animal knows the specific behavior that goes with that cue.

Once you have taught a behavior and put it on cue the clicker is no longer necessary for that particular behavior. If you need to brush up you can always bring the clicker back for a review session. As for offering a reinforcer consistently when you cue a behavior... there are diverging opinions. Some trainers feel that unless you consistently offer some kind of meaningful reinforcer when cueing a behavior you will see a deterioration of the behavior. Others think that offering a reinforcer each time will create an animal that needs a reinforcer for everything! I think the truth is somewhere in between and varies from animal to animal. BUT the answer when a behavior breaks down for some reason is MORE practice with valued reinforcers.

What about teaching an animal to target with the foot? You might think you could start by teaching the animal to look at the target but I think this is a mistake. I think you have to get the animal’s attention very quickly on the body part and leave the target to later on. I would click and reinforce taking a step and teach that behavior before adding the target. If you want to teach an animal to put his foot on a platform you can start with something on the ground for example a square piece of carpet. Next put something under that to raise it off the ground just a little bit. Learning how to chunk things down and build one behavior on the one before is how you shape behavior. The process can be slow at first but once an animal learns the process it teaches creativity and initiative and the animal learns each new behavior more quickly.

Clicker Training Set-up or The Antecedent Arrangement for

When it comes to the set-up or the antecedent arrangement clicker training camelids is different from teaching dogs. In order for an animal to learn and try out new behaviors they must feel safe. Most camelids feel safer in a group. Isolate one animal from the group and the animal can become so distracted that she can't concentrate and learn. Event marker training requires focus from both the learner and the teacher.

This is one of those times too when there are difference between llamas and alpacas and from one animal of the same species to another. It is perfectly fine to try different things and see what works for you and for the animal you are teaching.

Here are some options:

1. Work inside a catch pen with other animals in adjoining areas that are small enough that the animal in the pen doesn't feel all alone. Although working in the typical 9x9 foot catch pen that I recommend for haltering and other types of training can be too small. Room to move around is important.



2. Work with the animal inside a pen either alone or with one or two other animals either in the pen or in an adjoining pen, with you on the OUTSIDE of the pen. This keeps your learner close but safe because you are not inside the pen with her.

3. Work in a small paddock with one or two animals with other animals in an adjoining paddock.





4. Work in a large field with a group of animals choosing to work with the animal that is most interested. In this case my experience is that the most assertive animal will usually go first but will often tire and the next one in line steps up. This set up is much less of a problem than you would think. In fact working with a group of animals even a big group can be the easiest way to work.

If you have an animal who is particularly food aggressive you may be pleasantly surprised with how they respond to clicker training with food. In most cases when foodies learn how to work for food they put their energy into figuring out what you want so that they can get the food instead of trying to take it from you.

Food considerations

You must be in CHARGE of the food. The worst thing is for the animal to get the food from you by poking her nose in your pocket or pushing into your body. Your clicker kit includes a pouch that I selected after trying many different options for controlling the food. The pouch allows you to use a small dish to offer the food. I think it is better with camelids to offer food in a dish and to keep the reservoir of food in the pouch. Many animals either don't like to take food from a hand or are afraid to. The small dish I think is a better way to offer food than your naked hand. It has the added benefit of separating the clicker training process from hand feeding which can turn into food oriented inappropriate searching.



Using this system you can be in complete control of the food and it is not visible to the animal. Additionally you can leave the gear in the house and your animals are not always following you around wondering if you are going to offer food. It is a good idea to practice with your dish and pouch so that you get skilled at scooping out a small amount of grain from the pouch and offering it to the animal in a way that avoids dropping the grain on the ground. Grain on the ground is FREE and the animal becomes confused about working for food and getting it for doing nothing. I also selected a clicker that makes a loud but not jarring sound that works well outdoors or in a barn.

Train in the winter when animals are more dependent on the food we give them. When the animals live in lush pasture they are less motivated to work for food. This gives you something to do in the winter that you can do bundled up with gloves on that your animals will love.

It is always a good idea to weigh your animals regularly, but it becomes more important if you use concentrated food for training and do a lot of training. Remember that if you give your animals concentrated food on a regular basis you must subtract the amount of food you offer for training from their regular ration.