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Finding your dog's currency

By DIANNA YOUNG Special to the NEWS

How do you motivate a dog to learn? You "pay" him with something he wants. That thing that he wants is his "currency."

A tidbit of food is a type of currency that many dogs recognize and accept, and a lot of trainers use a bit of cheese or a piece of dried liver to motivate their pupils.

But many other kinds of currencies are available as well.

For some dogs, an effective currency might be an opportunity to play with a tennis ball or a tug toy, or a chance to go for a brief swim. For others, an effective currency might be petting and praise.

Sometimes, a dog's reward can be the simple pleasure he gets out of performing his skill. Consider, for example, a member of a retrieving breed who just loves to bring back a thrown object or a downed bird, or the assertive member of a breed noted for police work who gets to bite the padded arm of a person during protection training.

While many dogs recognize and accept food as a currency, we believe that a trainer often can find better motivators. Yes, you can teach a dog to sit by bribing it with cheese.

The method does work. But keep this in mind: The quality of the effort you get from a dog often depends on the type of motivator that drives him to perform the work.

You get better performance from an animal that desires to please – and to receive approval from – its leader. These desires spring directly from a canine's instinctive need to belong to a pack.

While you certainly can get some results by bribing a dog with cheese, that technique does not connect with any of his inborn psychological needs.

How can you best determine the optimum method to use with your dog?

You can begin by considering the natural tendencies of the particular type of dog with which you are dealing. Is your dog a type of hound? Is it an aggressive type of canine that might be used for personal protection? Is it a herding dog? A retriever? If it's a mixed breed, what do you think might be the combination of heritages from which it springs?

Dogs are highly individual creatures, just like people, so it is foolish to paint with too broad a brush. We often find exceptions to the general rule.

Still, an assessment of your dog's breed (or its primary breeds in the case of a mixed-breed animal) is a good place to start in trying to determine effective currency, and you need to be willing to be flexible in your approach.



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While I'm not a devoted fan of food incentives, for example, some types of dogs, such as hounds, sometimes do comparatively well with them, so food might be a good place to start in trying to find a currency that will work for your beagle.

A hound, by the way, is a dog – usually with long, floppy ears – that makes its living tracking other animals by means of a scent trail that animal has laid down on the ground (as opposed to scent that is pulled from the air).

Hounds have many 10s of thousands more scent receptors in their heads than do most other types of canines, and the most important thing in a hound's world tends to be its olfactory system.

Hounds tend to be less concerned than others about obedience tasks and more concerned about what they smell or taste. This does not make them "bad" dogs. They simply are bred to operate with different priorities than, let us say, herding dogs.

Canines with a tendency toward high prey drive (the desire to chase things that move), such as a Doberman pinscher or a Rottweiler, for example, often will work hard for an opportunity to chase a tennis ball.

Working and herding dogs, such as Australian herding dogs or German shepherd dogs, tend to have a tremendous willingness to please their owner or handler. A show of approval from that person often is a very adequate and effective currency.

A Labrador retriever might work for the same kind of reward, or he might work even better for an opportunity to chase a stick thrown into the water.

How then do these things affect us as owners and trainers?

These factors mean we should be realistic about our goals for a particular dog, whether we acquired it to be a working animal or a family pet.

Dogs are as individual as people. Some are very touchy-feely, others less so.

The amount of currency you pay, whether it's verbal or physical, must be individualized to the particular dog. You determine whether you're doing it correctly by the results you are getting. As a trainer, you have to be flexible. It's like driving a car. As you drive down the road, sometimes you need to apply a little more gas, and then a little less.

You have to pay attention, and read your dog.

Early in his training on a new task, you will reward him after every successful repetition. As he begins to excel at the task, you will request more repetitions from him before offering the reward. This goes back to a currency's value. If you offer too much of it, the currency loses value.

Keep in mind that most dogs need affection more than they need anything else – certainly more than they need a bit of cheese – and that nearly all dogs long for acceptance by the pack.

Because they have a need for acceptance and approval, it usually turns out to be one of their driving forces in wanting to perform for us.

Dianna Young is a certified, professional dog trainer and canine behaviorist who operates Camano Island Kennels. She can be reached at (360) 387-DOGS or at (206)932- RUFF.

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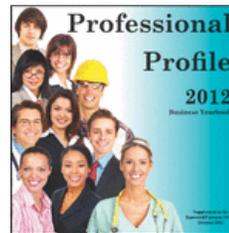
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