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Your Smart Dog

Mind Your P's and Cues: Help Your Dog Listen Better

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If you've ever visited Sea World, Disney's Animal Kingdom, or any other animal park or show you've seen some beautifully trained animals. Your dog can be just as well trained as the animals you've seen in those shows. In fact, those animals are trained exactly the same way we train pet dogs at Smart Dog University. **If you want your dog to listen better, it'll take some work from both your dog and you.**

One thing that differentiates those professional animal trainers from most pet owners is the way they ask their animals to do something. The animal trainers have taught very specific cues (called commands in the old days) to their animals to tell the animals what to do. Most pet owners are more relaxed than these professional trainers. Pet owners often have several words for the same behavior. For instance, you might say "C'mon," "C'mere," "Come Here," and "Come," when trying to get your dog to come to you. While those all seem to be the same thing to us because we *speaks English*, they are all very different sounds to our dogs who *don't speak English*. Yet, we get frustrated when our dogs don't come to all four of the words. That's pretty unfair to the dog, don't you think? **This month's newsletter is all about cues and how you can make a few changes that will help your dog listen better and more often to you.**

WHAT IS A CUE?

Let's start with what a cue really is. It's a request to your animal, it's the opportunity to earn something good (often called a reward or reinforcer). You may already have taught your dog some cues: "sit," to put his rump on the floor, "down," to put his belly on the floor. These are all verbal cues, meaning they're spoken aloud. There are also visual cues. I bet you've got some of these already established in your house as well. If your dog gets excited when you put your tennis shoes on because it means he gets to go for a walk, you've got a cue. The sight of you putting those shoes on means a walk is imminent.

Some cues are intentional (like the "sit" cue), while others are accidental. For instance, I'll bet you didn't teach your dog to come running when you open a potato

chip bag. But he comes running the instant he hears the plastic bag rattle, I'll bet. That's an accidental cue – you didn't intentionally teach it, but your dog learned it by association.

RULES FOR CUES

Those dolphin trainers you see at Sea World know there are a few essential rules to follow when choosing a cue. Now that we've talked a little bit about what cues are, let's get into how to choose one that will work for your dog. **To be a good cue, whether a visual or verbal cue, it should be a clean cue. A clean cue is:**

- Brief
- Easy for the dog to perceive
- Different from everything else
- Consistent

Think about the cues you give your dog: do they meet the criteria above? Many of my clients have cues that meet only one of the requirements above. They then wonder why their dog won't listen. Your dog can't comply with you if your request is confusing. **So let's talk about cleaning up your cues to make it easy for your dog to understand what you're asking.**

Brief – Cues should be short whether you're using a word or a hand signal. A flick of your hand is a good visual cue, or a short word such as "here" is a good, short verbal cue. A cue like this is confusing: "Fido, get over here right now. C'mon, now. Hey, Fido! COME!"

Easy to Perceive – This means that the cue should be easy for your dog to pick out of everything else that's going on. If you talk with your hands, it may be hard for your dog to tell when you're gesturing and when you're giving a cue. Make your cues clean and crisp whether they're visual (hand movement) or verbal (a word).

Different From Everything Else – This goes hand-in-hand with the previous criteria. A good cue is different from anything else you do or say. For example, you



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wouldn't use "Sit," to ask your dog to sit and "Sit Down" to ask your dog to lie down, you won't have much success. Keep your cues as different from others as possible.

Consistent – This one's pretty clear, but many dog owner's are not consistent when they ask their dog to do something. Sometimes they say "sit," sometimes "sit down," sometimes it's "sit, sit, sit, sit, SIT!"

When giving a cue, say the dog's name, then the cue. Say the cue just *once*. Don't repeat the cue. It would look like this: "Fido, sit." If Fido sits, click and give him a good reward. If he doesn't sit, simply walk a step or two away. Sitting = reward, not sitting = nothing.

WHY CUES STOP WORKING

There are many reasons why one of your cues might stop working. None of them have to do with the animal being stubborn, hard-headed, or truculent. Most of the reasons have to do with the people, not the dog. So if your dog stops responding, think about these possible causes:

- **Your dog doesn't know how to do what you're asking,** so he can't do the behavior. Clients will often tell me their dog never comes when called. I ask them how they taught their dog's recall and am met with blank faces. They never actually taught their dog to come when called, they simply yelled "Come," and expected the dog to understand the word.
- **Your dog doesn't recognize the cue.** Sometimes even I can't recognize the cues my clients is giving. If I have to ask you what your cue is, the cue isn't clear enough for your dog to recognize!
- **Your dog thinks something else is the cue.** You may think the cue is "lay down," but the dog thinks that your pointing to his bed is the cue. So when you say only the word, the dog is clueless. But when you point *and* say the word, the dog can comply.
- **The cue has been "poisoned."** This happens if you've used some old-style correction training. What this looks like: You say "Come," to your dog. He doesn't come, so you jerk on his leash a little bit. He then comes to you. No longer is the word "Come" associated *only* with good things. Now it's also associated with some yucky things. Your dog's not quite sure what to think about the word (and the action) "come," now. Sometimes the word leads to

goodies, but it now also sometimes leads to less than pleasant consequences. **The cue is now ambiguous – the worst possible fate for a cue!** This can happen with just one occurrence of punishment (also called a correction) and can be very long lasting. This poisoned cue creates doubt in your dog's mind which will slow down (or even prevent) your dog from responding correctly to the cue.

Make a list of all the cues your dog knows, including the ones you've purposely taught and the accidental ones (tennis shoes on = going for a walk, for instance). Then take a look at the cues and compare them to the list of rules and see where you can clean up your cueing. **You'll be impressed at how much better your dog behaves when you're requests are crystal clear to your dog!**

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