

Is Your Dog Screening Your Calls?

It's Friday night. You've finished dinner and you are settling in to relax on the couch and watch a good movie. You insert the DVD, hit play and begin to enjoy the movie. Two minutes into the movie your phone rings. You hit the pause button and run into the next room only to find that the phone display says Toll Free 800 service. Not wanting to listen to the pitch that you are going to receive by the salesperson on the other side you let the phone continue to ring and walk back inside to begin the movie where you had left off.

The above scenario is a great illustration of how your behavior is conditioned. In my home, so many of the calls are solicitations that I never get up for the phone any more. I wait to see if the caller leaves a message. If they do I determine if I want to speak with the person leaving the message. It may be a call from a family member or friend but, if the movie or sporting event that I am watching has my attention, I'll get back to them later.

Now, consider the following scenario. Suppose, you receive a call and the identification display reads Toll Free 800 service. As the person begins to speak they indicate that they are calling to offer you \$100 to listen to their company's newest jingle. This will take thirty seconds. At the end of the jingle all you have to do is push the number 1 if you like the jingle or the number 2 if you dislike it. There are no other strings attached to earn the reward. You jump up off the couch, pick up the phone, gladly perform the simple task and within a day the \$100 arrives in the mail. Over the next week every call identified as a Toll Free 800 number turns out to be a call that earns you easy money. This phenomenon now has you sitting by the phone waiting to receive the next call identified as a Toll Free 800 number.

During the second week of these fantasy phone calls only two out of three turn out to be easy money calls. However, since you can screen the calls by listening to the message you answer only those calls that offer a reward. Unfortunately, by week three the rules have changed. The easy money calls are no longer leaving messages. Since the calls can no longer be screened response time is important if you want to earn the easy money. Of course this means you will have to answer those calls that do not produce the easy money but you are more than willing to perform the task of answering those calls which don't pay off in order to earn the reward from those that do. Since time is money to the company making the calls, they have decided to increase the amount paid to \$150 for every call answered on the second ring and \$200 for every call answered on the first ring. This keeps you alert even when you may be engaged in something that you find very interesting.

After several months of receiving these calls the percentage on which you earn the easy money reward has gone down significantly. However, something fascinating has happened over the same time. You have developed trusting friendships with people who make the calls. Even though every call doesn't result in the easy money reward the caller always has something nice to say or a way to cheer you up. In fact, life overall seems pretty good since you have been receiving the easy money calls. You know that if you

answer every call you will earn enough of the easy money to keep a roof over your head, eat well, purchase the “toys” you want and enjoy the company of some trusted friends.

Given this new reality you do something you wished you could have done a long time ago – quit your job! The old boss never had anything nice to say. If you did a good job you were never rewarded and if you made even the smallest mistake on your work you were punished for it. That old boss who was constantly “yanking your chain” would need to find someone else to kick around!

What are the morals of this story?

- Rewards can be used to condition behavior and develop a strong bond between you and your canine friend.
- Over time rewards can be diminished and replaced by praise and affection.
- High value rewards should never be eliminated completely.
- Punishment is not a good way to get someone to work for you.

About the Author: Charlie Petrizzo, certified dog trainer, has worked with dogs and horses for more than twenty years. He trains dogs for private clients and breeds and trains Labrador retrievers for children with disabilities. He earned a bachelor's degree from St. John's University in New York, a diploma from The Animal Behavior College and is a candidate for an advanced diploma in canine fitness and nutrition from Cynology College. His personal story, including recovery from two life altering accidents that left him temporarily paralyzed and permanently scarred from burns over two thirds of his body, is truly inspirational. Charlie is a dynamic and motivational speaker. His website is www.circleoflifecanine.com. He can be reached at ak9nose@earthlink.net.