

The APDT

CHRONICLE

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of the Dog

*Running a "Reactive" Dog Class:
It's Not All Fun and Games*

by Pia Silvani, CPDT-KA

*Bad to the Bone: Analyzing and
Assessing Dog Bites*

by Cara Shannon, JD, CPDT-KA, CAP1

*The Tellington TTouch Method:
Groundwork for Dog-to-Dog Aggression
and Reactivity*

by Jenn Merritt, CPDT-KA



In the last “Of Dogs and Men” column, I covered some of the fundamental differences in the way women and men think and how these differences will affect your training sessions. In this column, I’ll be presenting some techniques that will help you to bridge the gap between you and your male customers.

Know your audience

The young children sit nervously at their desks anticipating the arrival of this year’s new teacher.

A tall, dark haired man enters the room. He stands in front of the class, quietly clears his throat, touches his mustache and with a hint of a smile asks, “How many of you got married over the summer?”

The kids start to laugh. A few of the adventurous ones raise their hands and respond, “I did.”

“First marriage?” the now smiling man replies.

For the past two decades this is the way my friend Bill, a teacher, has introduced himself to his students.

“Kids at that age don’t want a tall, dark-haired, deep-voiced man as their teacher,” he explains. “They want their teacher to be a young woman or a grandma type. So, I have learned to put the kids at ease and to connect with them by being funny.”

Bill is a great teacher. He’s also a great salesperson: he knows his audience, he knows himself, and most importantly, he knows the value of connecting the two.

Long time sales consultant Zig Ziglar states: “Sales is the transference of a feeling.” Feelings can’t be transferred unless sender and receiver are connected. A salesperson can’t make a sale unless there is a connection with the customer.

Of Dogs and Men

John Visconti



Similarly, as trainers, we can’t succeed with our customers if we aren’t connected to them. Remember, you are always selling. You’re selling yourself and your techniques, and you’re selling your customers on what they can achieve with their dogs. Knowing *who* you are selling to is a critical first step to making this all-important sale.

You can’t connect with someone who isn’t there: The case of the invisible husband

When working with a couple, if you don’t have direct access to both owners, your opportunity to coach consistent interaction with their dog is lost. A dog receiving inconsistent direction from two owners is much less likely to respond in a desired and reliable manner. As a result, the positive impact of your session is reduced. The chances for positive results for your business are also reduced.

With this in mind, when I respond to an inquiry about my training services, I always make a point of requesting that both owners be present for training sessions. Sometimes, simply asking is enough. I also explain why it is important. Many owners think trainers perform magic and will simply come in and “fix” their dog. Customers often don’t realize that when we conduct a training session, the dog is not the student. They are.

In addition to explaining the importance of consistency, I always point out that I have seen myself on video working with dogs and I very often see ways I can improve my techniques and interactions with the dogs. I tell clients >

that their partner can serve as a real-time video recording. It's a great advantage to be able to better one's techniques in the moment.

In situations where I sense resistance, I stress the advantages gained when both owners are present during training. If that fails, I'll offer incentives to achieve this. These incentives can be discounts on private sessions, free sessions, half price entrance into group classes (contingent upon both owners being present during private sessions), free entry into a fun monthly sweepstakes (big secret: everyone wins), gift certificates, etc.

If successful, the cost of any incentive offered is more than offset by the greater likelihood for success in the training session and the greater chance of referrals for my business.

Use your imagination. Create incentives that will entice both owners to be present during your training sessions. Doing so will not only help them but it will help your business gain referrals.

Practice your poker face

A motivational turning point, one of many that lead me to write "Of Dogs and Men," came while I was watching a DVD recording (Dog-Dog Aggression) of a two day seminar/workshop by the incomparable Patricia McConnell. Working with a female volunteer and her dog, Dr. McConnell was teaching an on-leash turn. She demonstrated how to lure the dog through a turn and then handed the leash to the volunteer. The woman began walking with her dog and at the point of the turn, rather than luring, she pulled the leash, moderately "popping" the dog. Although clearly not what she was teaching, Dr. McConnell remained calm. On the other hand, the mostly female audience gasped, as if the woman had administered 1500 volts of electricity to the dog. Nothing was heard from Dr. McConnell until after the group's reaction, when she gently and humorously admonished the audience, "I know, I know. Be good. Sit. Stay." The volunteer stood nearby with her body language communicating embarrassment and discomfort.

At that moment, I thought to myself, "No wonder so many positive reinforcement trainers don't connect with their audience ... especially their male customers." To my ears, there was an element of judgmental self-righteousness in the audience's response, and there's no better tool for putting up a wall between yourself and a customer than judgment.

I know a lot of men who would look at that moment on the DVD and not even know what the audience was reacting to. And if they did know why the audience reacted, many would think, "Oh please, it's a dog. My dog pulls harder than that on walks." In a case like this, getting bogged down in right and wrong isn't particularly constructive. Patricia McConnell's reaction was perfect. She kept her emotions in check and used the moment as a teaching opportunity. If a

world-renowned training expert can respond calmly and without judgment, you can too.

Accept that something like the above might happen during your training sessions. Rather than lose the opportunity to train by reacting in a judgmental manner, try to remain calm and remind yourself of your goals. No, we don't want our customers to leash pop their dogs. But keep things in perspective and remember that your customers have employed you because they want to train their dog in the right manner. They will make mistakes. If they didn't, they wouldn't need you. If they make a mistake, don't react with your emotions. It's a teachable moment; teachable moments are what we strive for with dogs. We should do the same with our customers, especially if you are a female trainer with a male customer. A teachable moment is not the time to demonstrate, on any level, that you are "better than" your customer.

So, perfect your poker face, check your emotions, count (quickly) to 10 before responding, and you'll stand a much better chance of connecting with your male customer.

Pictures paint a thousand words

I suppose there are dog owners who want to hear about the Premack principle, and variable reinforcement schedules, and the four quadrants of operant conditioning, but I don't think there are a lot of them, and of those few that do want to hear it, *very* few are men. Men are more inclined to learn from visual input than words and theory.

There's a reason that guy with the television show has captured the attention of so many male dog owners. His communication is simple, direct, visual, and action-oriented, with no discussion about scientific theory and ideology. There is no reason why you can't do the same with your male customers.

Demonstrate more; speak less. Break down your training methods into small steps and demonstrate them one step at a time. Men tend to be more action-oriented, so allow them to practice each step in front of you. Focus on the positive: "Great job on that!" Make your corrections easy to embrace: "I used to do the same exact thing and so do most of my customers," and then offer advice to correct the mistake.

With regard to training techniques and ideologies, rather than discussing learning theory and scientific principles, paint a picture. For example, when explaining why physical, aversive methods aren't my choice, I refrain from scientific discussions. I also refrain from being judgmental. Instead, I speak in down-to-earth terms that create a visual:

"When you were learning to play baseball as a kid, if each time you swung the bat and missed, your coach administered a shock to you, my guess is that you would lose your concentration, because you'd be more focused on the shock than hitting the pitch. Or maybe you'd realize that rather than swing at the pitch, it would be smarter to freeze, knowing that if you didn't swing the bat, nothing bad could happen. In any case, *[continued on next page]*

regardless of your reaction, you would probably be angry with your coach. Learning under these conditions is nearly impossible.

“On the other hand, if each time you swung, your coach pointed out what was good about the swing and reinforced you with encouraging words, wouldn’t that be a more effective way to learn? Your dog learns the same way.”

Visuals leave indelible impressions.

Square pegs, round holes

If you’re working with a male dog owner, it is essential that you give him tools he can work with.

High pitched, sweet sounds or bouncy body movements, while effective with dogs, are techniques that are not accessible for many men. Asking a man to attempt to do this is like trying to force a square peg into a round hole.

Next time you’re at a wedding, note the difference in the way women and men dance. Also note how many women are dancing with each other because their male partner is Crazy-glued to his chair. There’s a reason for that. It’s the same reason men can’t interact with a dog the same way a woman can. So please, don’t expect us to.

A clicker works well in cases where men (and women) have problems emoting. The click is a unique sound which doesn’t require anything outside of the capacity of your male customer. I’m also a big fan of using a clicker in a multi-owner household so that the reinforcement for the pooch is consistent among the owners. And the clicker is a tool! Guys love tools.

If my customer has an issue with using a clicker, I will sometimes suggest he condition his dog with a unique word that the dog will associate with rewards. Essentially, it’s the same principle as charging up a clicker, only with a unique verbal marker. I instruct the owner to speak the word and reward the dog repeatedly just as one would charge up the clicker. Once the word takes on special meaning to the dog, the owner can now speak that word in his normal tone and it will hold great power as a reinforcement.

Still not getting through?

If, after all of this, you still feel like you aren’t winning over your customer, it may be time for a heart to heart. Sit down and discuss what is and isn’t working. Acknowledge the gender differences with your male customer, address them directly and give him some other options. Regardless of gender, everyone should value open and honest communication.

In my next column I’ll detail some real life encounters I have had with male customers who were not familiar with positive reinforcement training and, in some cases, were downright opposed to it. You’ll read, in their own words, how they were won over.

John Visconti is a professional trainer in New York; Chair of the APDT Business Benefits Subcommittee; and with Mira Leibstein, CPDT-KA, co-presenter of their program "Transitions: Your Baby and Your Dog." John is also a published songwriter and has taught his wonderful rescue dog, Pepper, an awesome recall cued with a blues harmonica. He can be reached through his Website, johnvisconti.com.

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