

The Postman Always Rings Twice...

...and other reasons to bark like a maniac

Behavior is like a mathematical equation in which each component of the equation interacts with every other component, leading to an outcome that is unique to the components involved. For instance, if you have taught your dog to Sit on cue, your dog has learned this equation: "My person says, 'Sit', I move my body in this way, and my person gives me a cookie!" If you were to then write that equation out, it might look like this: "Sit" → Sitting behavior → cookie; or, more generically, $A \rightarrow B \rightarrow C$. One thing (the Antecedent) leads to another (your dog's Behavior), which leads to another (the Consequence).



But here's another common equation dogs learn: "This strange dude in a weird suit comes to my door and rattles around every day (he might be dangerous!); so, I bark as loudly as I can, and he goes away." Now, if that man in the weird suit were an escaped convict in a prison jumpsuit, you might be quite happy for your dog to behave in this manner; but how often does that happen? More likely, the "dude in a weird suit" who, much to the chagrin

of your dog, visits your home every day - is the postman, just doing his job. And while you know that your dog's barking does not, in fact, make the postman go away (it's his job that does), from your dog's perspective, barking certainly seems to pay off, increasing the likelihood that he will bark under the same circumstances again.

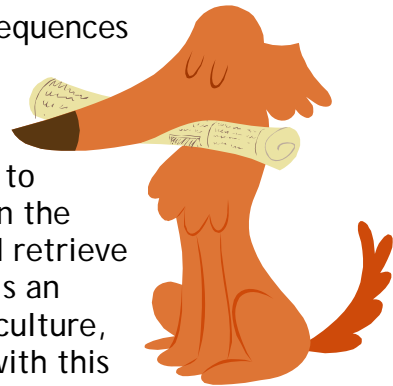
Just as in mathematics, changing the outcome of a behavioral equation is fairly straightforward: change any one component within the equation, and the outcome will be necessarily different. $1+2=3$, but if you substitute any new number for any old one, the entire equation looks different: as $5+2=7$ and $1+3=4$! In the same way, if the postman comes to your door and, rather than rattling around anonymously, gives your dog a cookie as he hands you your mail, the equation has changed, and your dog's behavior will likely change, too. You see, the postman is no longer an ominous door-rattler, but a person with whom you seem to be comfortable and who comes bearing gifts - nothing to bark at here! The equation now becomes: "Hey, here comes that dude in the really recognizable suit (my favorite suit, I think, because it reminds me of him), and



I know he's going to bring good stuff for my person and me! I really hope he stays awhile longer today..."

Getting a handle on problem barking is not all about antecedents, however: changing the ending of the equation - the Consequence in our Behavioral ABCs - will necessarily change the components leading up to it. For instance, dogs often bark at their people for attention. But if barking were to make you leave the room and close the door behind you instead, your dog's perception of the effectiveness of barking to gain attention would change. And so, **manipulating the things that come before (Antecedents) and after (Consequences) a problem behavior make an impact on the behavior itself.**

While you are working with the Antecedents and Consequences that shape your dog's behavior, remember, too, that training an alternate and incompatible behavior can go a long way towards solving any training conundrum. For instance, it is very difficult for a dog to bark with a toy in his mouth: teach your dog that when the doorbell rings, that is his cue to run to his toy-box and retrieve a toy to present to his visitor. And since sharing toys is an acceptable social behavior in both canine and human culture, both your dog and your visitor will likely be satisfied with this new, quiet greeting ritual: doorbell → fetch the toy → fun for all!



Finally, do remember that barking is another one of those perfectly dog-ish behaviors that dogs engage in just because they are dogs, and because barking is one powerful communication tool in canine culture. Most people appreciate a warning bark that tells them, "Hey, there's someone coming up the sidewalk!" And if your dog understands that you heard his warning and acted upon the situation yourself, he will not feel the need to keep pestering you: "Hey, are you listening?! I said there's someone coming up the sidewalk! Do I have to do everything around here?!" Take the lead - "Thanks, Fido! Let me check this out." - and your dog won't have to - "Whew! Glad I let my person know - I was afraid I'd have to ask that stranger to leave... Now I'm free to go take my nap."

