



MUTT ABOUT TOWN

Professional, positive dog training serving the Bay Area

415-294-1356 muttabouttownsf@gmail.com <http://muttabouttown.com>

High-Value Treats: What does this mean?

By Maureen Backman, MS, Owner and trainer of Mutt About Town

If you have read literature on positive reinforcement, or reward-based, training, you have most likely come across the phrase “high-value treats.” But what exactly do trainers mean when they say this, and why is this phrase so important when it comes to training and communicating with your dog? The key to answering these questions is one word: motivation.

“*Dogs do what work.*” It’s a common phrase used among trainers, including by animal behaviorist Jean Donaldson. Essentially, this means that dogs do behaviors based on that behavior’s consequences. While we would all love to think dogs are overjoyed to “behave” because of their devotion to their owners, the fact is, praise and love typically isn’t motivating enough.

This doesn’t mean dogs don’t love us, and it definitely doesn’t mean love and praise are useless. On the contrary, love and praise are crucial to a strong human-animal bond, and praise used along with a treat is a powerful reward. But when it comes to training, let’s face it: Most of what we ask dogs to do is boring and, as trainers like to say, expensive. In human terms, it’s like eating vegetables instead of ice cream, or doing chores instead of watching a movie. It takes us a sufficient amount of motivation to do these things. Some tasks, like cleaning the bathroom, take even more motivation. Wouldn’t you be more inclined to do your chores or eat your vegetables if you knew an irresistible reward would follow?

The same goes for dogs. Doing sits, downs and stays by themselves aren’t very exciting, but when paired with a compelling motivator, obedience commands become a bit more enticing. For dogs, one of the most compelling motivators we have available is food.

When you ask your dog to sit, your dog wants to know, “Why should I?” High-value treats are the answer.

Examples of irresistible treats (cut up into small pieces): Pecorino romano, diced chicken or turkey, cold cuts, freeze-dried liver, and baby food (turkey and gravy flavored).

Before choosing your chosen treats, it’s important to check with your veterinarian about any special dietary concerns your dog might have.

Perform an experiment with your dog. Take a handful of his typical kibble or dry biscuits and lure him into a down. Repeat this about 15 times, asking him to stand up before going down again. Now take a handful of something new, like diced roast chicken or pecorino romano cheese.

Do another 15 repetitions. See any difference? Odds are, your dog will be much more attentive with the pecorino romano than his daily kibble. Imagine the difference if you repeated this experiment in a dog

park when working on recall. With a myriad of competing distractions and

Continued on other side



MUTT ABOUT TOWN

Professional, positive dog training serving the Bay Area

415-294-1356 muttabouttownsf@gmail.com <http://muttabouttown.com>

the freedom of being off-leash, the pecorino romano will be a lifesaver.

Let's return to the chores example. For person A, cleaning the bathroom may require a minor reward, like the knowledge of having a clean bathroom. For person B, this reward may not be enough. Person B might need the motivation of a cup of tea and a bubble bath, or perhaps a long walk outside. We all vary in our motivation requirements for any given task.

Dogs are no different. In the above experiment, you may have found that your dog willingly worked for kibble and pecorino. Congratulations - you have one food-loving dog! Or you may have found that your dog paid no attention to you until you brought out the good stuff. Don't worry - there's nothing wrong with your dog. You just need to find the right motivator to make him click. Once you find it, you're golden.

Once you have the food, you still need to do a few things to make it high-value:

- Find out what makes your dog pay attention. For some, it's ham. For others, it's pecorino romano. For others, it's freeze-dried liver. Experiment until you find a treat that makes your dog motivated.
- Only use your chosen treats for training. This will help preserve their rare, high-value status.
- Use food that can be broken up into small pieces - you'll be dispensing them quite often during training!

Some dogs, often the "drivey" breeds like border collies, adore toys even more than food. In this case, toys can be used as a motivator in lieu of or in conjunction with food. The mechanics may be trickier, especially if you're using a tugger or squeaker toy, but your dog trainer can help you work through any tough spots. You can also bring out toys for the really expensive behaviors, like recall, and use the high-value treats for other less-expensive behaviors.