

Question for the Trainers Forum:

If there is only one trainer on staff, what suggestions do you have for training, especially more complex behaviours?

This question leaves some options - depending on how many animals are to be trained.

In the case if there is more than one animal to be trained there is always a possibility to ease the trainers work by using separation – if the facility enables this option. If the separation is not possible or if it is not ‘too reliable’ as a behaviour, it will probably set some training goals further in the future.

The separation is of course something that should be part of the daily training program anyway.

A better way to get more attention to different individuals during the training is to target some of the animals on stations while training the others. Then do the training in turns and let the ‘first ones’ ‘rest’ while the second one/ group is performing the behaviours.

In short a target or stationing is a tool to be used of course in any training situation. Target can be anything that points the animal’s attention to a specific direction; A ball at the end of a stick, hand, light, ice cubes, water spray etc. Be creative!

In a more complex behaviour the target can mark the starting point of a chain of behaviours or it can mark the point in which the different behaviour(s) should occur within the chain.

The animals can also be trained to follow the trainer and perform specific behaviour(s) in easily recognized positions within the exhibit. The trainer takes the animal(s) to follow her-/himself and stop and give SD on each position the animal should perform the requested behaviour. The SD can be faded as the training proceeds. When the chain (pattern) of behaviours is established by following the trainer is time to proceed in fading the trainer. The trainer can gradually fade her-/himself away by stopping just a little bit before the last position behaviour is to be performed and by letting the animal to proceed further. Hopefully the animal will perform the behaviour in the correct (recognizable) position.

When this is reliable it’s time to stop earlier (..and earlier) and let the animal proceed with the behaviour. By proceeding on this kind of manner to the previous position a chain of behaviour can be achieved. The behaviour is then trained to the animal(s) in inverted form – from the end to the beginning.

Often times in training a chained behaviour is a combination of both targeting and getting the animal to follow the trainer are or can be used to achieve a reliable result.

Sometimes more creative ways can be used. Here in Särkänniemi Dolphinarium (Finland) we have actually several times used a ‘dummy trainer’ to get our dolphins to perform behaviours in a specific location of our pool setup.

As an example; we had a real size (beautiful & blond) woman made of cardboard ‘stand’ at the corner of our pool to get the dolphins to swim first to that location. After that location the animals were to start a pectoral wave as they were swimming in front of the pool. This way, due to the lack of trainers at that moment, we managed to train a nice behaviour for the end of our show, where the animals are waving good bye to the audience.

At least here in Finland it’s possible to get this kind of ‘trainers’ from gas stations or video rental stores.

Who knows – you might end up getting Mel Gibson or Kathrine Zeta-Jones in your training team. ;-)

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