



## INFORMATION SHEET

# PREFERENCE TESTING

## Help gain motivation & focus when training

Over the years there have been a number of papers that have investigated whether animals have motivations and preferences, whether they make conscious choices, and if given various foods to choose among, do animals make adaptive choices that are good for them? **Why are such questions important when we come to train our animals?**

Before animals make choices, they go through a decision-making process which is guided by their motivations and preferences. To maximise the likelihood of our pet performing the behaviour[s] we're after, we need to create motivation first. This can be facilitated by using rewards our pet finds 'brilliant', rather than using what WE think they like. For example, one client I saw recently insisted her dog liked these chewy chicken treats and have some ready for our session. The problem she was having with her dog was establishing a good recall. Using the Preference Test, this dog showed that when given a choice, he repeatedly chose the other item (his strong smelling dried kibble) over chewy chicken. So, we swapped out the chicken for something else - venison - to see how that competed with the dried kibble. The dog repeatedly choose the venison over the kibble - throughout the session, none of the chicken was eaten! This was a great surprise to the owner - she had been struggling with recall yet often used the chicken to reward. So, preference testing can be used to understand your pet's 'pay scale'. In other words, what is their £5, £20 and £50 note equivalents. This can be done with food against food, food versus toys, and toys against other toys, games or activities.

### How to test

1. Gather 3-4 different items to test against.
2. Ask your dog to "Sit" & "Wait" if they know how, otherwise get a helper to gently hold the dog's shoulders.
3. Place 2 different items you're testing against, around 1-2 feet apart and in-line, approximately 8-10 feet from your pet.
4. Use a release cue (e.g. "OK") and see which one they go to. Avoid leaning to one side, looking at a particular item or pointing towards an item, to reduce bias.
5. Repeat at least 3 times to determine your pet's preference. If they choose the same side each time, place that item the other side, & repeat the test to rule out any right or left-hand preference (e.g.) depending on whether an owner typically rewards from one particular hand.

Having determined your pet's favourite item, swop out the rejected one for another, & re-test against the previously favoured item to see how that fairs. Watch my video on How to Preference Test at <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=337267884527880>

## Ideas of what to test with

When comparing foods, I typically start with the dog's kibble and compare this to another, such as a dried food treat.

Then I will move along the 'pay scale' to discover what the dog perceives as more valuable.

Make sure the pieces of food are cut around 3-5mm to avoid filling up your dog too quickly.

Below are the sorts of foods I will test with:

- Kibble
- Dried commercial dog treats
- Raw carrot
- Cucumber
- Cooked chicken
- Frankfurter
- Mature cheddar cheese
- Venison sausage for dogs
- Cooked salmon
- Dehydrated liver
- Rabbit sticks
- Kangaroo sticks

Here are some toy/other item ideas:

- Tennis ball
- Soft rope toy
- Squeaky animal toy
- Lotus ball
- Empty clean water bottle
- Rod or dog flirt pole
- Wobbler / food dispensing toy
- Frisbee