



**CLINICAL ANIMAL
BEHAVIOURIST & TRAINER**

Nurturing Pet & Owner Relationships



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 guided by their motivations and preferences. In order to maximise the likelihood of our pet performing the behaviour we're after, we need to create motivation first. This can be facilitated by using rewards that our pet finds brilliant, rather than using what we think our they like. For example, I recently went to see a client who said their dog loved roast pork and had some cut up, ready for the session. However when given a choice, the dog repeatedly chose his dried kibble over the pork, then in the second test he repeatedly choose venison over the kibble - none of the pork was eaten! As you can imagine, this was a great surprise to the owner who was struggling with recall, and often used roast pork. You can use preference testing to understand your pet's 'pay scale'. In other words, what is their £5, £20 and £50 note equivalent. This can be done with food against food, food versus toys, and toys against other toys or games.

How to test

1. Gather 3 to 4 different items to test against.
2. Ask your dog to sit & wait if they know how, otherwise get a helper to gently hold their shoulders.
3. Place the 2 different items you're testing against around 1-2 feet apart in-line and approximately 8-10 feet from your pet.
4. Use a release cue (e.g. "OK") and see which one he goes to. Avoid leaning to one side or looking at a particular item to reduce bias.
5. Repeat at least 3 times to determine your pet's preference. If your dog goes to the same side each time, place the item to the other side and repeat the test. This is to rule out any right or left-hand preference, depending on whether an owner has typically rewarded the dog from one particular hand.
6. Having determined your pet's favourite item, swop out the rejected item for a one and re-test against the previously favoured item to see how that fairs.

Click the link to watch my video on How to Preference Test

<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