



## It All **CLICKS** Together

With a clicker in hand, you can bridge the feline-human communication divide

by RUTHANNE JOHNSON

**At first glance**, Mimi seems like a typical cat. She basks for hours in sun-drenched corners of her Watertown, Mass., home. She investigates new objects with persistent curiosity. And when her ears are being cleaned, her voluminous meows often rival her operatic namesake.

But there's more to this 11-year-old Burmese than meets the eye. Mimi sits, stays, climbs ladders, and gives "high fives" on command. And she knows how to issue

her own requests, such as for a fresh bowl of water, a litter box cleaning, or an open set of blinds so she can peer out a window.

Her family insists she's no feline Einstein—"she's perfectly ordinary in every way," says owner Christine Dowd. But she did have the advantage of once living with behavioral biologist Karen Pryor, an expert in clicker training. Through years of clicks, tricks, and treats, she grew from a sometimes temperamental cat, wholly

dependent on beings with a limited knowledge of her language, to a confident kitty who communicates with genteel skill and grace.

While visitors to the Dowd household are invariably amazed by Mimi's abilities, there's nothing esoteric about the art of clicker training. The technique is built upon the concept that animals are more apt to repeat behaviors when they are rewarded and reinforced rather than punished or suppressed through domination. "You are striking up a bargain—I will give you what you want for doing this certain thing," says Pryor.

Many species have demonstrated the power of pairing a clicker with rewards-based training, from horses learning to accept a saddle to dogs working an agility course to iguanas accommodating a medical exam. Pryor has seen shelter volunteers armed with clickers transform a room full of shy cats into ones who perform tricks on cue and actively seek attention.

The clicker itself is a low-tech device that makes a distinct sound when pressed. But unlike voice commands, the clicker always sounds the same—delivering unambiguous "you got it right" feedback. The sound becomes a "conditioned reinforcer," Pryor says: an event marker that travels through primitive parts of the animal's brain governing memory and emotion. While the clicker pinpoints the exact behavior in your cat's mind, vocal commands or hand gestures teach her the word or signal associated with her new skill. Each exercise is followed by a nibble of tuna, a stroke of the brush, or lavish praise—an irresistible treat that virtually guarantees a repeat performance.

Behavioral changes typically occur in just one session, says Pryor, who during a dinner party trained her host's cat to "play the piano" by repeatedly pressing a key. "If the cat is willing and hungry, that's about a five-minute training job. And they never forget it."

But it's not just about parlor tricks. Cats can be taught to refrain from darting out open doors, prowling atop kitchen counters,

or scratching furniture. And training can lessen anxiety or boredom that may be triggering more complex behavior problems.

When Kent Yunk's recently adopted and otherwise healthy Cornish Rex started urinating outside the litter box, the San Carlos, Calif., resident turned to Marilyn Krieger, a certified cat behavior consultant. Krieger's solution included clicker training for Neo and his sister, Luna. Yunk wasn't so sure about the idea: "I was like, yeah right, I'm going to be herding cats."

His skepticism disappeared as his cats' repertoire quickly soared. Both kitties learned to sit, stay, spin in a circle, and sit up on their hind legs on command. Best of all,

Neo became more relaxed in his new home, and his litter box troubles diminished. Now that he's seen what his cats are capable of, Yunk is ready for new challenges: "I would like to get them to jump through hoops and to the point where I can brush their teeth."

Learning to jump through hoops and even locate keys has benefited Krieger's 18-year-old rescued Bengal, who suffers from cognitive problems. By teaching Maulee these tricks, Krieger has been able to keep her elderly pet's mind and body engaged. "I've noticed that when I clicker train her every day ... she seems more active and alert," she says.

And whether your cat learns a few

tricks or becomes a virtuoso performer, working together to master a skill strengthens your bond, Krieger says, and builds rapport in your interspecies relationship.

Mimi's family can attest to this capacity for transformation. "It's like this door of communications has opened and you enter into a new world," says Dowd.

When Mimi wants the bedside lamp turned on to warm her favorite napping spot, she gazes at it with what the Dowds refer to as "Mimi's golden stare." After her owners correctly interpret the request and touch the lamp, she licks her nose—her way of delivering a "click" of approval.

**JOIN THE CLICKER CLIQUE** In just 10 minutes a day, you can teach your cat new skills, exercise his body, challenge his mind, and enhance your bond. Start by training your cat to follow a target, such as a wooden spoon or a chopstick, says behavioral biologist Karen Pryor. Clickers are available at any pet store (for deaf cats, substitute a pen light). Arm yourself with small treats your cat finds irresistible, and you're ready to join the clicker clique.

#### STEP BY STEP

- 1 Sitting on the same level as your cat, click and give him a treat. Wait until he has finished the treat and looks back up before delivering another click and treat. "What you are doing is pairing the sound of the clicker with that motivator, so every time they hear that clicker they will have a good feeling about it," says certified cat behavior consultant Marilyn Krieger.
- 2 Place the target close to your cat's nose. When he sniffs the target, immediately click and reward the behavior. It's important to click while the behavior is happening, not afterwards, Pryor says.
- 3 Hold the target to the side after the behavior is repeated, so your cat turns his head to sniff. Click and treat.
- 4 Hold the target farther away. When your cat moves toward and touches the target with his nose, click and treat.
- 5 Once he begins following the target, you can encourage him to perform a variety of commands. For "sit," place the target slightly above his head and in front of his face.
- 6 After your cat learns a behavior using the target, add a verbal command, such as "come," "sit," or "spin." The clicker and target may become unnecessary once he responds regularly to the verbal cue, Pryor says.

#### TIPS FOR SUCCESS

- ▶ Hungry cats are more easily trained. Don't train when your cat's belly is full, and use small, pea-size rewards he can devour quickly.



- ▶ Cats won't tolerate being drilled or punished. "As soon as you introduce some kind of scolding or some 'uh-uh-uh,' the cat will leave and the game will be over," Pryor says.
- ▶ Five to twenty clicks is typically a good starting session for a cat; each subsequent session can be a little longer and harder.
- ▶ Train one cat at a time initially. Once they have learned new skills, they may perform on cue together.

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