

Beyond “Yes” And “Good”: Why Your Dog Needs “Spotlights”

Speaker Key

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Transcript

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If you're like most people, you have certain words that are general markers for your dogs. Things like “good,” or “yes,” or “excellent.” But there's a problem and that is we use those words in everyday conversation. Every single dog owner should adopt the use of Spotlights. “Whoa! What am I getting?”

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Hi, I am Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog, where dog training finally makes sense at both ends of the leash. Today, I'm going to revisit a topic that I first introduced in [Shaped by Dog episode number 151](#).

And that is that of Location Specific Reinforcement Markers. I know a mouthful, such a mouthful that I actually have rebranded that phrase to “Spotlights.” I'll tell you why in a minute.

In today's episode, I'm going to share with you the Spotlights that I currently use for all of my dog training. Why I think every single dog owner should adopt the use of Spotlights, what they bring to your training, and what's lacking when you're not using them.

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First up, why Spotlights? Let's face it, “Location Specific Reinforcement Markers,” it's a mouthful, it's clunky, it's difficult to say. The word “Spotlight” does what it says. It shines a light of clarity on what's important for your dog. Now, if you're like most people, you have certain words that are general markers for your dogs.

Things like “good,” or “yes,” or “excellent.” I myself used to use those exclusively. Back in 1996, I registered my dog training business as “Say Yes Dog Training.” Say Yes because “yes” was the general marker word that I used for pretty much all of my dog training. But there's a problem with general marker words, and that is we use those words in everyday conversation.

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We may say to our dog, “That was so good. Yes! Excellent! Good boy!” But they're not necessarily followed up with high valued reinforcement that the dog wants. And so, over the years they get dulled in their importance.

Think of if you've ever used a clicker. When you click the clicker, your dog will get their ears up and their eyes bright because they expect something amazing is about to be delivered to them, something they find very reinforcing.

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The clicker creates what we call a Positive CER, a [Positive Conditioned Emotional Response](#). When the dog hears the clicker, their emotions are that of excitement, anticipation of something they absolutely love. That's what we want from any marker word that we use when we're training our dog.

Clickers are great, but we can do better, and that's where Spotlights enter the picture. Because dogs aren't just learning behaviors when they're training with us, they're learning predictors, predictors of what is reinforcing them.



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Because dogs are driven for what is reinforcing, which is why they pull on leash if there's something exciting ahead, which is why they get into the garbage, get on the counters, raid your pockets if you leave your coat hanging over the back of a chair.

They are great predictors of things that they find reinforcing. Which is why a Spotlight is brilliant for your training. Because a Spotlight accomplishes three things, tells the dog exactly what they're getting. There's no longer any question. Is it a toy? Is it a food? Do I get to go for a swim? What is it that I'm getting as my reinforcement? The word good or yes, could be anything. It could be nothing.

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A Spotlight always means something, tells the dog what they're getting, tells the dog where they will be getting it. Either hold the position or drive to a different position. And it also triggers an emotional response in the dog. And that one is super important. That one is telling the dog when they get excited and when they shouldn't.

For example, I have a Spotlight that I only use when I'm creating calm in my dog. Maybe it's conditioning a puppy for a relaxing massage. Maybe it's conditioning a puppy [to have their nails trimmed](#). I want them to assume a relaxation position.

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And when I reward that puppy, I don't say click because the click is going to go, “Whoa! What am I getting?” What I use is the word “Gooooood.” It's the only time they hear that from me and I don't say “good.” I coo it, “goooooood.” And then I deliver a reward, a food reward, something that is easy for them to swallow.

Not a crunchy, not a big one, just a small reward that they can continue to relax and eat that small soft reward. Likewise, when I'm training a puppy and I want them to anticipate a fun game, I'll use the word “chase,” and I'll stand up and run away dragging a favorite toy. The word “chase” very quickly stimulates an excited pre drive.

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The puppy can't wait to charge after me to start [a great game of tug](#). Now, I would never be training a dog to relax and say the word “chase”, would I? Because then I'd have a dog who's like, “Oh, is it now? Is it now?” Spotlights bring clarity and as Brené Brown says, “clear is kind.”

And anytime we can amplify kindness in our dog training, we know we're on the right track. Because Spotlights don't just mark behaviors, Spotlights share with the dog exactly where success lives. I'm going to share a little analogy, so stick with me on this because it might be a little farfetched.

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Imagine for a moment you loved to hear the sound of your phone ring. And you loved for your doorbell to ring. I get it most of the time neither are true but just play a little game of make believe. What if every time your phone rang, it was amazing news. “You just won the lottery.” “You just won a vacation.” “You get to take the day off today.” Every single time that phone rang, it was nothing but good news.

The sound of your phone ringing would become a Spotlight for you. You could be relaxing watching a favorite movie and your phone would ring. You wouldn't go, “Oh, just put that on Do Not Disturb.” You would run. It would be like the Chase cue for my puppy. “Where's my phone?”



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Alright, now imagine the sound of your doorbell and every time the doorbell rang you got an amazing delivery, maybe dog beds, whatever. Every time that doorbell rang, it was variety. Either someone you hadn't seen in a long time surprising you, it was somebody delivering an amazing gift for you. Every single time that doorbell rang, it was something crazy good.

Now we have two Spotlights. Your phone wouldn't ring and you suddenly run to the door, would you? No. Your ears up, your eyes bright, you'd be looking for your phone because you have the clarity of where the reinforcement lies.

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It doesn't lie at the door. Now imagine if you have a back door and the back door, the front door, and the phone all had the same ring. Imagine when you'd hear the ring the frustration as you ran from door to door to, “Oh my gosh, oh my God! I've got to get my reinforcement.”

That's kind of how your dog feels when they get a general marker. And the difference in the clarity we bring when the dog knows what they're going to get and where they're going to get it. And that's what a Spotlight delivers to them.

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Because the truth is, confusion absolutely slows the learning for all of us, including our dogs. Specificity accelerates that learning. And the secret is that I've come to learn over time is that Spotlights or Location Specific Reinforcement Markers are both markers and cues that prompt behavior. General markers are not.

I'm going to say that once again, Spotlights are both a very specific marker for your dog and a cue that prompts behavior. Knowing this, you should then understand that when you give your dog a cue that they understand number one, and that they love you now have an additional Spotlight. That will make sense in just a minute. But the key to all of this is that the reward that you're using should strengthen the behavior.

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It should be something that you know with great certainty that your dog absolutely loves. And that's why I think it's really important [to grow things that your dog loves](#). There's three categories that of things we can use for reinforcement. Obviously number one, food rewards, but they take on all different shapes and sizes.

Toy rewards. That could be a game, a fetch. It could be a game of tug. It could be a game of chase. And activities that reward. Sending the dog to a pool or a pond to swim in. Sending the dog to chase another dog. Sending a dog to go see somebody or taking the dog on a car ride. Activities that you know the dog loves, can be reinforcements and can be reinforcers to your dog.

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And the higher the reinforcer, the more likely I'm going to include them into my everyday training. Therefore, it might be something I'd consider building a Spotlight for. All reinforcement should strengthen the behavior. It shouldn't take the dog away from the behavior. Back in [Shaped by Dog episode number 151](#), I mentioned something very powerful I learned from my mentors, Doctors Bob and Marian Bailey. That is, we should mark for behavior, reinforce for position. A Spotlight allows you to do just that.



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For example, I'm going to share with you my food related Spotlights. The first one I've already told you about, and I don't use it very often, only [during anything relaxation](#), “gooooood.” Now, I might say “good dog” or “good girl” to my dog. That's not the same as “gooooood.” They understand the difference. They understand a soft, easy to swallow cookie is coming when I say that “good.”

“Cook” is something that I normally use in training, it means ‘hold the position you are currently in. I will be delivering a food reward to you.’ So, if I was working on a sit stay, if I was working on my dog [staying in Hot Zone](#), if I clicked my dog for staying in the Hot Zone, they would look towards me and come running over to get their cookie.

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So sure, I would be able to mark for behavior if I wanted to reward a dog with a clicker in the Hot Zone, but I wouldn't be able to reward it for position because the click would bring the dog out of position. So, “cook,” my dog understands, means ‘You're doing a great job. I'm about to deliver something you really love but hold that position.’

The next Spotlight I use for food is “search.” It means ‘you can now leave position and look for food that I just threw on the ground.’ This Spotlight also has the benefit of helping the dog understand there's no need for looking for food on the ground if you didn't hear the word “search.” Search means now you can search for food on the ground. Otherwise, it's out of bounds.

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There are two more Spotlights I use for food. One of them, even my own students don't know about because I haven't really talked about it. So, the first one I absolutely love, and I use it a ton in my training, and that is the word “chow.”

Chow is there's food in a bowl on the ground and you now can run and grab it. I love this because I train with raw, but even if I didn't, I could leave like a nice meaty treat or something I know my dogs really value. I could put it on the floor, and it could be a distraction. It could be a squirrel running by.

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It could be something the dog really loves and I might have the dog work around me, and when they're say walking on a loose leash or walking off leash beside me, I could say, “cook” which means ‘hold your position. I'm going to deliver a reinforcement.’ And when they ignore the food on the ground, I could say “chow” and they could run to the bowl.

Now for those of you who are saying, “If I put a bowl of something really, really exciting on the ground, my dog is not going to walk beside me off leash. They are beelining it over there.” I'm going to share at the end of this podcast episode how you can get that clarity from your dog and it will be worth it.

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Okay. The final Spotlight I'm using for food is when my dog might be walking ahead of me, and they made a really good choice, they sniff something, but instead of rolling in it, they kept walking. I'm going to say the word “treat.” Which means ‘come running to me and get a cookie from my hand.’

This is the last food related Spotlight that I've ever used. I never really thought I would use it. It's surprising to me how often I do use it. Where I want my dog to be in motion, they don't have to wait till I get there.



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So, I'm not dulling the effectiveness of my word “cook.” I'm telling the dog ‘run to me and I'm going to give you a food reward that you're going to love.’ You'll be surprised how fast your dog starts running to you when they hear that word.

Okay, let's step over to toy Spotlights. So, the Spotlight “strike” tells my dog ‘Spin back towards me. Grab a tug toy and let's start an amazing game.’ Imagine the emotion that I am triggering for a dog who loves to tug.

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Likewise, I could leave a toy on the ground just like the food reward on the ground, have my dog work around it, and then if I say, “bring” it means ‘you can leave position. You can leave work, you can leave anything you're doing right now, fly out and grab that toy, bring it back to me, and we can then start a great game with that toy.’ It might be tug, it might be Retrieve games.

I've already shared with you the cue I use with puppies, which is “Chase.” Which means ‘game on, chase after me. I've got a great toy.’ The toy might be dragging out in front, but I might drop it as the puppy gets closer. I'll evolve to that stage once the puppy gets a little bit older.

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And a Spotlight that I rarely use anymore, but Momentum, my dog who is now doing rally with Michelle who works here. Momentum understood this one. I would hide a favorite toy in my armpit, and I would walk and she would be in heel position. And if I said “pit,” I would just open my armpit, and it would drop right into her mouth.

Well, Momentum was not the best catcher but toys she actually could catch good when she heard the word “pit” because she knew exactly where to look. You don't need to use all of these. There's probably many more that I don't use that a lot of my friends would use. I strongly encourage you to adopt one or two. The ones that I would pick are the reinforcement you use most often.

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One reinforcer that tells the dog to hold position, I'll bring the reward to you, and one that means drive to me or drive away from me. So, you might pick two or three Spotlights to start with, one at a time. Build value for your dog's understanding before you move on to the next one. Which ones should you choose?

The ones that reflect the reinforcements that you currently use in your dog's training. Now, I also said that we can use activities to reward our dog, therefore say the sport of dog agility. I have my dog at the first obstacle. Remember, Spotlights are both a marker word and a cue that prompts behavior. So, when my dog is at the start line, I'm very present to what they're doing.

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So, if my dog is paddling their feet, or maybe looking in the wrong direction, if I gave them the word of the first obstacle, that Spotlight would be telling them, ‘That's exactly what I want you to do at the start line. You do that.’

So, if my dog is getting antsy and maybe getting out of their sit or creeping towards the first jump and I said, “jump.” The Spotlight is saying, just like a clicker, ‘I like what you're doing. Please do that more often at the start line.’ A Spotlight is both a marker and a cue. Therefore, cues that your dog already knows can be used as Spotlights.



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But the double edge to that sword is you have to be present to every part of the behavior the dog is doing before you use a Spotlight. My dogs love to swim, so “swim” is a Spotlight. And I'm going to have them do something I like.

So, if they're screaming and barking and they're on leash and they're pulling, if I take off the leash and say, “swim,” what am I going to get more of? Spotlights are both markers that tell the dog ‘I love what you're doing.’

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Just like very similarly to other markers, like a click, but they're also a cue that prompts behavior. I think it's a super important distinction that all dog owners need to be aware of. When you give a cue that the dog knows you are actually reinforcing them for what they're doing when they hear that cue. It's both a marker and a cue that prompts behavior.

So, what's the downside of choosing never to use Spotlights? I think that you are giving up access to an amazing tool that will bring far more clarity to your training than what you're currently doing. I think you will run the risk of your dog always moving from position when they hear anything that might trigger the predictive reinforcement cycle is about to begin.

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You run the risk of dogs hesitating because they're unsure of where their reinforcement is going to be delivered. You run the risk of dogs becoming frustrated because they don't know where they're getting the reward or what that reward is.

And it's really very little effort on your part. Just to adopt a few cues and use them consistently in your training opens so many wonderful opportunities for your dog to get clarity in their training. It isn't a concept just for sport dogs or agility dogs.

It's a concept that will improve the relationship of every dog and their owner. Because you're growing confidence. You're growing clarity. You're giving an expedience to the dog's reinforcement process because they know exactly where the reinforcement is going to be delivered and what they're going to get.

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And you're going to add more joy to behaviors that should be stimulating and more calmness to behaviors that shouldn't be. So back to our food or toys on the ground, and there's no way that the dog is going to be able to work through that.

I want that process to be something that is growing your dog's confidence. Like, “Oh yeah, you can put that on the floor. I know this game. That's no problem.” How do we get there?

It starts very simply by a game that I call ItsYerChoice. And it just so happens that we've just improved our ItsYerChoice Summit and we'd love for everybody listening to this to have access to it.

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So, you're going to find a link to the show notes. It's 100% free. There you will learn potentially your first Spotlight while you're learning how to give your dogs autonomy to have the freedom of choice and how that dog can learn to ignore things they really want until they hear a Spotlight that gives them access to grabbing it.





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So, click the link in the show notes. Join the ItsYerChoice Summit. We love to help dog owners just like you, evolve your understanding of dog training so that you can have a deeper, more meaningful connection with your dog, both in training and outside of training.

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Thank you for joining me today. And as always stay curious, stay humble, and continue to make life amazing at both ends of the leash. I'll see you next time right here on Shaped by Dog.

ItsYerChoice Summit:

[Learn How to Play ItsYerChoice](#)

Resources:

[Podcast Episode 151: How Location Specific Reinforcement Markers Will Improve Your Dog Training!](#)

[Podcast Episode 176: Why Your Dog's Emotions Are A Critical Element Of Dog Training](#)

[Podcast Episode 107: Pedicure Please: 3 Steps To Dog Nail Trimming Or Grooming Success At Home!](#)

[Podcast Episode 89: Why Dogs Should Not Tug: The Truth Revealed](#)

[Podcast Episode 205: The Hidden World Of Reinforcement For Dogs And Why You Need To Know](#)

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About Susan

A world-leading educator of dog trainers, Susan is also one of the most successful agility competitors of the last three decades. She has won multiple Gold Medals at National or World Championship events with every dog she has ever owned over the past 30 years. Susan was one of the very first dog trainers to share knowledge online when she opened her "Clicker Dogs" website many years ago. Susan has helped hundreds of thousands of people enjoy a great relationship with their dogs through her workshops and keynote speaking around the world, award winning books, DVDs, magazine articles, blog posts, podcasts, free dog training and dog agility video series, and online dog training programs.



A natural teacher and an entertaining speaker, Susan is world renowned for her dog training knowledge and practical application of that knowledge. Her understanding of how to apply science-based learning principles to both competitive and family pet dog training has been pivotal in changing how dogs are trained.

Susan is now helping many thousands of dog owners in 82 countries have the best relationship possible with their dogs. The real joy for her comes from bringing confidence to dogs and their owner through playful interactions and relationship building games that are grounded firmly in the science of how animals learn.



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