

# INTRODUCING YOUR HORSE TO A CLICKER: TARGETING

There are many different ways you can do this, but it is generally suggested that you introduce the clicker by teaching the horse to touch a target.

Small orange cones, for example (the kind you buy, as lane markers for sporting events) are a good idea. You can also use lids off of supplement cans, cider jugs, anything that's handy and horse safe. Start with targeting because it's a very simple game, plus it's not part of the horse's normal training.

You find a safe place for you and your horse. Then you hold a cone, or some other object up in front of the horse. Horses tend to be curious about such things. They'll sniff towards the cone. The instant the horse bumps the cone click and treat. If your horse won't bump the cone, then break the behaviour down, so when your horse sniffs or looks towards the cone, click and treat and progress from there.

The horse may start mugging your hands as soon as it realizes that food is involved. If they get too pushy, just step back out of range. The mugging is part of the learning process, and the key is not to get distracted by it. Keep yourself safe, but let the horse explore. He's going to discover that going directly to the vending machine never earns him treats. Help your horse to be successful.

If your horse swings his head away to look at something, take advantage of that to position the cone between the horse's head and your body. He'll have to bump into it on his way back to mugging you. When he does, click! He gets a treat. As this happens again and again, he's suddenly going to realize that bumping the cone gets you, the vending machine, to work!

You can almost see the light bulb go on. As many times as we've watched this process, it's still a magical moment when the horse realizes that HE'S in control, that he can make ME click. All he has to do is bump the cone. He's also learning something else that's important. He's learning that he NEVER gets clicked for sniffing my fingers, pulling on my coat, or bumping me. If you have a mouthy horse, clicker training is a great way to teach good manners.

## FINDING THE RIGHT REWARD

The clicker is a bridging signal. It links a desired behaviour to a reward. The reward is not what WE say the animal should want. A reward is anything the ANIMAL finds reinforcing. So first we have to find things the HORSE wants.

So what do horses like? Both kicking up their heels, and standing still belong on the list, as does a vigorous massage, time with a favourite pasture mate, or a chance to roll in a sand pit. The problem with this list is obvious. It's hard to use these things in a

training session. You can't let your horse drop and roll every time he gives you a right answer.

Timing is another factor in choosing a suitable reward. Without a bridging signal rewards need to be delivered exactly when the behaviour occurs. That way the horse can clearly mark what it was doing and repeat it again for another reward. Delays between behaviour and reward can lead to confusion. You think you're rewarding your horse for dropping his head. He thinks it's for swishing a fly with his tail. So how do you resolve the problem? Very simply: You introduce a secondary reinforcer.



Food, or a pat on the neck is the primary reinforcer. It's the thing the horse wants. The secondary reinforcer, or bridging signal as it is also called, is a conditioned signal, which becomes linked to rewards. It tells the horse, "You are about to get a treat." Without a bridging signal food is hard to use with horses. They get too eager, and it becomes more of a distraction than a help. But WITH a bridging signal you can channel that eagerness into performance. Food as a reward works wonderfully. It's convenient for the rider, and highly motivating to the horse.

Experienced clicker trainers such as

Alexandra Kurland say that they have been astounded by the results. Everything from basic manners to upper level performance can be taught with the clicker. Clicker training piggybacks beautifully onto other training systems. It's not a substitute for, but an enhancement of techniques you already know. The clear "yes" answer of the clicker accelerates the learning curve and creates eager, happy horses.

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## VARYING THE REINFORCER

So what can you use for treats? Grain doled out a teaspoon at a time, carrots, breakfast cereal, chopped up apples, sugar cubes, peppermints, animal crackers, bread . . . really anything that the horse enjoys and that's safe for it to eat will work. The important point here is that you want to vary your reinforcer. You can give your horse important information just by changing your treat. Reserve the special treats for those for exceptional moments. When the peppermints come out, for example, they know they've done something particularly wonderful, and they make an extra effort the next time.

*The printed information contained in this fact sheet is kindly provided by Judy Ryder-Duffy and Alexander Kurland; author of "CLICKER TRAINING FOR YOUR HORSE" & GETTING STARTED: CLICKER TRAINING FOR HORSES. You can purchase Alex's books by printing off the order form at <http://www.crisny.org/users/kurlanda> & mailing it to; Alexandra Kurland, 110 Salisbury Rd Delmar, NY 12054 USA. The Australian Clicker Connection Website can be found at <http://www.equilog.com.au/clicker.htm> & Clickers can be purchased in Australia through Equilog. ( ph ) 02 499 86095. <http://www.equilog.com.au>.*