How to Put an End to Counter Surfing

BY AIDAN BINDOFF

A new trick

Many dog owners complain that their dogs steal food from kitchen counters or even the dinner table. A new term was even coined to describe this behavior: counter-surfing. If you're tired of losing your dinner to a sneaky pooch every time you turn your back, here's what to do.

"Stop" strategies

Counter-surfing is unwanted behavior. In operant conditioning, there are three basic approaches to stopping unwanted behavior:

1. Punishment through a consequence that diminishes the unwanted behavior
2. Extinction (allowing the behavior to fade away on its own) through removal of the reinforcer that is maintaining the unwanted behavior
3. Training an alternative or incompatible behavior

The first approach, punishment, has its disadvantages. It is usually (but not always) unpleasant, and therefore not much fun for dog or owner. Judging an effective level of punishment can be tricky. Too much punishment can be damaging, and too little can be ineffective. Other behaviors may end up being punished unintentionally, sometimes causing the dog to simply learn to avoid an entire situation altogether.

If you punish your dog for counter-surfing, for example, your dog may decide that the kitchen was the source of the problem, and opt to avoid the kitchen altogether—which could cause a host of other issues. But by far the most common problem that occurs when punishing counter-surfing is that the dog only learns not to steal food when the owner is around. As soon as the owner leaves the room, watch out!

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This leaves us with the remaining two options: extinction and training an alternative or incompatible behavior. If you are new to clicker training, find an index card, write down the following, and stick it to your fridge:

- What is reinforcing this unwanted behavior and how do I remove the reinforcer?
- What would I like my dog to do *instead* of this unwanted behavior?

Remove temptation

The answer to the first question in this case is easy: FOOD. Recall the adage "opportunity creates the thief." Food left unattended on kitchen counters is simply too tempting and too reinforcing for the thieving dog. Each time your dog manages to find food on the kitchen counter, counter-surfing has been reinforced. Extinction of counter-surfing requires clean kitchen counters. Use storage containers, high shelves, and cupboards so that food is never left unattended within reach of your dog. Clean up countertop spills and tidbits immediately, as even a *crumb* can be enough to reinforce some dogs. If food must be left unattended, put your dog in another room and shut the door. There is no sense in providing opportunities for reinforcement when avoiding it is as simple as closing a door.

Try instead

So what would we like our dogs to do instead of counter-surfing? We could choose a specific behavior, such as lying on a mat in the kitchen, and in severe cases we could train and proof this single behavior to be reliable even when we're not in the room—and even when there is juicy steak lying all over the counters!

If the mat is your dog's normal bed, then he can be taught "go to mat" fairly quickly by capturing this behavior. Simply wait until your dog lies down on the mat on his own, then click and treat. If you toss the treat a short distance away from the mat, you will set up the next trial. When your dog is reliably going back to the mat to lie down, put it on cue.

Increase duration

Once you have the "go to mat" behavior on cue, start adding duration. Rather than clicking as soon as your dog goes to the mat, hold off a second before you click and treat. Gradually increase the time before you click, second by second.

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Keep the mat in the kitchen or, if space is tight, just outside the door but still in view. When you have 30 seconds of duration on the mat, try asking your dog to "go to mat" the next time you prepare food in the kitchen. Click and treat (toss the treat to your dog on the mat) every 5 seconds at first, then start to build duration up again.

Why lower the criteria to 5 seconds when you know the dog can stay for 30 seconds on the mat? This is a new training picture, and we've introduced distractions (food being prepared), so we have to lower our criteria to a point where the dog can—and will—succeed.

When your dog is staying on the mat while you prepare food for 30 seconds, try leaving the room. Only leave briefly at first, return, and if your dog is still on the mat, click and treat. Again, build duration slowly, at a rate where your dog will succeed.

Eventually, they'll know better

All that most dogs need to know is that there are plenty of opportunities for reinforcement for a range of behaviors that don't include stealing from the kitchen counters. When preparing food, make sure you reinforce nice behaviors such as sitting patiently, or lying down on the floor or a mat. Be sure to leave the room briefly, just to return and reinforce these nice behaviors that are offered even when you're out of the room. At first, be sure to tidy food from the counters so that any counter-surfing is not reinforced.

By combining extinction with regular reinforcement of alternative behaviors, your dog will learn that the most reliable way to get food is to sit patiently, or lie down out of the way. Attempts at counter-surfing will not be reinforced and will eventually go away. If your dog has been reinforced for counter-surfing many times, or intermittently, then the extinction process will take longer—but it will happen.

Remember the two important questions raised above—what is reinforcing this behavior, and what would I like my dog to do instead? These can be applied to virtually any unwanted behavior: raiding the garbage can, barking at the door, jumping on visitors, even pulling on the leash. You hold the power to solve any one of these problems if you can answer those two simple questions and consistently apply the solutions.

Selection from www.clickertraining.com provided courtesy of Aidan Bindoff.

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