# INTERVIEW

## An Interview with Bob Bailey by Angelica Steinker

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Angelica: What is the most challenging behavior you ever trained? Why was it so challenging? How did you overcome the challenge?

Bob Bailey: It is difficult to say what was the most challenging, and for several reasons. I consider training (animals) and teaching (people) to be the synonymies, though others may not. Teaching people was usually tougher (challenging) than training animals, even though the processes are much the same. Many (most?) people tend to be very resistant to new ideas. The challenge was to change trainer (people) behavior; as is so often the case, the challenge usually was to find a high enough value reinforcer to make it worthwhile for the trainer to want to change. I used everything from pizza through tokens to access to games and playing up to the trainer's competitive instincts (some might call it work ethic) — Bailey's Dictum: get the behavior!

If the subject is restricted to animals, it is difficult to beat the challenge of open environment training: dolphins and sea lions at sea; ravens, vultures, and gulls in free flight; dogs and cats in large airports or shopping malls. The rigors of open environment training are compounded by distance, time, and situational novelty and complexity.

My company, Animal Behavior Enterprises, trained many kinds of animals for open environment operations. We usually trained to client specifications, that is, the client usually determined what the animal was to accomplish and where it was to accomplish it. How the animal did it, and how we got the animal to do it, was up to us. Often times the species to be used was also specified by the client. Another way to describe it was the mission problem was given us and we designed a system to solve the mission.

Much of what we trained animals to do was counter to what the animal would have done in the wild. We usually guided animals into unfamiliar surroundings, where they were to ignore novel and sometimes hostile stimuli. A dog or cat might be remotely guided into a busy airport or shopping mall, where they would be cued to sit or lie down for long periods of time. A dolphin might be guided several miles and asked to perform one or more complex tasks over a long time while in that strange environment. Guidance and other stimulus control signals were usually surreptitious. The development and deployment of such signals was sometimes more difficult than getting the behavior. Perhaps it is the complexity of the animal–machine interface and the "systems" approach needed for these somewhat elaborate schemes that made these training tasks so challenging, and, in my view, interesting.

But, training cats, dogs, birds, and whatever for single-take TV commercials can be challenging. There was precious little on-site rehearsal time. TV producers and directors were constantly changing their minds. The stage was never as advertised. The shooting script was never what you contracted or trained for. And, what about the deceptively simple appearing automated shows my company is perhaps famous for? Designing, producing, and training entertaining and reliable automated animal shows that can be shipped around the world was a challenge. Our shows could be used by virtually anyone willing and able to read and

follow written instructions. However, we had hundreds of these shows "on the road" at any one time. The creative misinterpretation of simple written instructions by the average person on any continent was staggering, and begs description. How does one answer the question, "Do we really have to keep putting feed into the electric feeders?" Needless to say, we spent more time "people proofing" the equipment, and the animals, then we did any other aspect of production.

What was the most challenging animal or project? After many thousands of clients, animals, behaviors, and employees, over almost half a century, I cannot say for sure. I can say that they were all a challenge, and life was very interesting.

Angelica: What is the most challenging dog you ever worked with? Why was he/she challenging? How did you overcome the challenge?

Bob Bailey: We had a couple of American (not the British version) Basset hounds that the Army sent us to test for mine detection work. The distribution of various natural physical and mental characteristics of higher organisms may be described by what is called a bell-curve. In the normal bell-curve, there are relatively few animals with what might be called exceptionally good characteristics at one end of the curve, and a few animals with exceptionally poor characteristics at the other end. In the middle are the vast majority of organisms with more or less normal levels of whatever the characteristic might be. The physical appearance of the line describing such a curve resembles a bell. Well, none of the American Bassets I have worked with could have been described as mental giants. But, these two government Bassets may have been at the very end of the low end of the bell curve. Additionally, the speed of motion of these dogs resembled that of exhausted garden slugs.

Was training these dogs impossible? Of course not. Was it slow and tedious? An understatement. Was it impractical to get these dogs to make rapid, repetitive detections? Well, yes. Again, an understatement. Each detection was painfully slow, and was followed by the rather leisurely chewing of whatever food reward offered. What about non-nutritive reinforcers? Sure, if we were willing to accept the several seconds of introspection, or perhaps meditation, that preceded the dog's approach to the proffered toy. What we ended with was the incredible spectacle of two almost perfect molasses-slow detection dogs. It was painfully funny to watch. I've trained opossums and sloths, and there were some remarkable similarities with these particular dogs.

Angelica: What is the most challenging animal you ever worked with? Why? And how did you overcome the challenge?

Bob Bailey: Again, it was not so much the challenging animal, it was the challenging behavior and the environment in which the behavior happened. Ravens and crows are very smart birds. But, it was a challenge to teach the birds to fly out 400 meters, enter a totally strange room and recognize classes of room furniture, and then, depending on the furniture, select one unfamiliar object of a certain class from many other objects, pick up that object, and return.

Why was this a challenge, and how did we overcome the many hurdles that faced us? The number of potential targets was astronomical. It was not practical to train under every conceivable circumstance. We had to rely on the birds' powers of generalization. We trained using such things as simple blocks and dowels of wood shaped similarly to the final objects. We trained discriminations, and then generalizations, all the while at close range and for thousands of trials. We maintained a high level of reinforcement, but we pushed for accuracy and speed of performance; what has come to be called "fluency." We automated when practical. Machines were tireless and more accurate than people. Record keeping was important, and the machines tracked numbers of trials and successes. Because we trained over 100 ravens, and each raven performed many thousands of trials, we found it worthwhile to automate. We had learned that machines could perform repetitive training tasks very well, and

we were very good at building labor and time saving machines. These machines improved our product and reduced costs. Of course, the machines could not have done this without expert supervision by skilled trainers. The trainers knew when to change the settings on the machines, or when to step in and take over when the machine could no longer do the work accurately. If we had a "secret" to our training, it was the adherence to training fundamentals; the use of machines when practical; and the trainer's skill to know when and how to take over from the machines.

I won't say that this was the most challenging, but just an example of the challenges that faced us.

Angelica: As professional trainers, we spend more time working with humans than we do with companion animals. What advice do you have for us in modifying the behavior of humans?

Bob Bailey: First, try to forget briefly that you are a professional trainer. Try to put yourself in the shoes of your client. Remember when you did not know so much about training. Don't be dismissive about the client's problems. Listen much. Talk little. Observe. Ask gentle but probing questions. What are the client's problems? Not what you immediately interpret the problem to be, but the problem as described. Have empathy, and maybe even sympathy for the human condition, as well as for their animal charges.

OK, you've watched and you've listened. You arrive at some conclusions, and a course of action. But, remember, it is your course of action, not your client's. Until your client buys into your recommendations, you don't have a prayer for implementation. Your client will do most, maybe all, of the training. So, what does your client want? What would make it worthwhile for the client to follow your plan? How can you make your plan your client's plan? This is not the time to build your ego. You are a hired gun. You provide a service. The measure of your service is the success of your client and the service animal, not how well you quote some rules of training. The measure of your skill is how well the student translates your words into successful action.

How do I know this to be true? The desire for success is universal. I learned to determine what the client needed to be successful from the client's point of view. It doesn't matter if the client needs a new animal stage show, or if the client needs a dog that will retrieve a dropped telephone—success is defined by the client's needs. Clients may be impressed initially by technical words, but it is the understanding and following of simple instructions that leads to success. I stayed in business not because I impressed clients, but because I helped them to be successful.

As some of you know, I don't much like to write about personal issues and practices, but rather about the technology I believe best for changing behavior. However, in this case, I believe I have a worthwhile sample of teaching the technology. In my first level operant conditioning (chicken training) workshop, students get (by shaping and by luring) very simple behavior. The emphasis is on getting behavior, and a high rate of success. The tasks are simple, but not always easy. As the class progresses, and especially at the very end, the tasks are still simple, but more and more difficult. Always, there are clear and obtainable objectives, with lots of very fast feedback. Students seldom have a chance to rehearse poor behavior (a major point often overlooked when teaching novice trainers). They see their mistakes quickly, thanks to the chickens quickly either learning, or failing to learn, the target behaviors. By the end of the class, most students see how they have changed their behavior in many ways. They begin to understand my remarks at the beginning of the class, where I say that I am not interested so much in changing the behavior of chickens as I am interested in changing the behavior of students. I have done much the same teaching with dogs. However, people training dogs tend to get hung up with social issues. But, that is another topic for another day.

So, what do I suggest? Start simple. Give the client a small success teaching their dog to do a simple task. Don't ask for the moon. Don't be afraid to praise small successes. Some people appreciate seeing their successes in writing, so consider the value of written records. If you don't succeed in lighting up the client's eyes the first time, try something else. You may appreciate complexity; your client doesn't. Your client wants it, whatever it is, to work. If the client is disabled and cannot handle a clicker, don't require it; don't even mention it. Don't inadvertently discourage your client. Give the client only useful tools. Don't set up the client for failure. Take small steps. When the client is ready to move on to more challenging tasks and methods, be prepared to introduce them.

Angelica: Concept training is becoming something of increasing interest in companion animal training. Can you tell us some concepts that you have trained and how long it took to reliably get the behavior on cue?

Bob Bailey: Not exactly sure what you mean here, but I will give it a shot. I have already mentioned that our ravens were taught concepts involving objects and actions. We also did this with dolphins and some other animals. Many animals are poor generalizers. I suggest that most trainers push too fast when teaching generalizations. Here are a few suggestions: Don't mix up lots of objects and actions in a training session. For that matter, early on, teach only a few objects and actions. For instance, teach a retrieve (which is really a pick up and bring it to me) and a push separately at first. Teach retrieving until any object touched, or approached, when given the FETCH command, is picked up and brought to the handler. Separately, teach the PUSH command until any object approached or touched, when given the PUSH command, is pushed with the nose. Before moving on to other commands, be sure that the dog will fetch and push flawlessly, even with objects never before used. Then move on to TUG, and other such commands.

Some trainers barely get discrimination before beginning what is called "proofing" or making difficult demands, with a high potential for failure. I believe this slows training. I have almost always trained to a high level of proficiency before making serious demands. By the time most dogs learn half a dozen locomotion and manipulation commands (go places and handle objects), I have found that what some call "concept formation" begins. But, these behaviors must be solid, and the animal willing to perform them under almost any condition.