

THE DOGGY DIGEST

TRAINING TIPS BROUGHT TO YOU BY MUTTS WITH MANNERS

The Conundrum of the Counter Surfing Canine

By Trelle Dandridge

Dogs who are always jumping on counter tops or tables can be frustrating to live with. Whether they are jumping on counter tops when you turn your back, or only engage in counter surfing once you leave the house, a little bit of training and some environmental changes can make a big difference in management of behavior.

Before we can discuss the 'how' of curtailing canine counter surfing, first it is important to understand the 'why', or the function of the behavior. Animals continue to repeat behaviors that have a function. Most of the time the function of the behavior inadvertently is the reinforcer of the behavior. Counter surfing is a behavior rooted in survival instinct.

What does Fido get out of counter surfing?

FOOD

Fido is an opportunistic animal. If he sees or smells food, you can bet he is going to investigate it. If he continues to see and smell food, the behavior will become a dreaded habit.

Keep those counter tops free of unattended food. This includes unwrapped food, and even food you wouldn't even dream Fido would want. Think street dogs. If your dog had to learn to live on the streets, he probably ate all kinds of things to survive. If they learn the delicious food is always on the counters and tables, they will look for moments to indulge, because this is where the good stuff always is.

CLEAN THOSE COUNTER TOPS

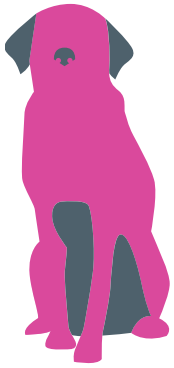
Keep counter tops wiped down and clean. We don't even want them to smell like something to investigate. The most conniving counter surfer will even do it for crumbs. So, take extra time after each meal and wipe those counter tops down.

ATTENTION AND PLAY

Believe it or not, this can be an attention seeking behavior. Even if you have been coming at Fido with spray bottles, the attention can reinforce the behavior. Remember that old saying? Any attention is good attention. It is true for animals also.

Some dogs take this attention seeking behavior to the next level. They don't care what they steal. It could be the game of chase that is motivating them to continue to counter surf. Dogs have stolen entire tomatoes, sponges, and salt and pepper shakers just to get attention and start the chase game.

Pro Tip: if your dog does this, they need to learn a 'drop' cue. Start with something easy, like a favorite toy, and make the game your idea. Ask them to drop the toy and simultaneously move the treat in front of their nose. Most of the dogs will gladly drop the toy for the treat. Progress to harder items and don't forget to play around with the magnitude of reinforcement if you need to in order to get Fido to drop the super fun sponge.



THE DOGGY DIGEST

TRAINING TIPS BROUGHT TO YOU BY MUTTS WITH MANNERS

The Conundrum of the Counter Surfing Canine

By Trelle Dandridge

CURIOSITY

Animals are naturally curious and sometimes can't help themselves when given an opportunity to see their environment from a different perspective. IN these instances, a simple 'off' cue, once learned, can be given as a reminder.

If there isn't any food on the counter tops, and there is nothing tempting for Fido to steal, you can also just ignore the behavior. Once four feet are back on the floor you can redirect him to a puzzle feeder, stuffed Kong, or play toy.

MANAGE FIDO'S ENVIRONMENT TO SET HIM UP FOR SUCCESS

- Remove unsupervised food from counter tops and tables.
- Keep food items put away behind pantry doors, in the microwave or toaster oven, and in the refrigerator. Some people have had to use child locks and pet proof containers to store food safely away from their clever canines.
- Clean all surfaces when you have finished your meal.
- Crate Fido or use baby gates when you need to walk out of a room briefly.
- Give Fido alternative activities to keep him busy while you are preparing and eating meals, such as puzzle feeders, stuffed Kongs, or other enrichment items.

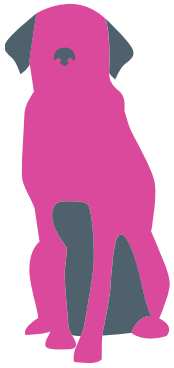
Counter surfing is one of those problem behaviors where management is going to be your best friend. That is where all of the magic fairy dust will lie. By controlling the environment, and managing the triggers (or antecedence) to the behavior, Fido will be set up for success, and over time, will investigate the tables and counter tops less often.

Teaching Fido a 'place' cue can be helpful to give him somewhere to go when you are preparing and eating food in the kitchen. It is a pretty easy behavior to teach as well. The 'place' behavior is an incompatible behavior to counter surfing. Fido can't do both at the same time, so he will choose the more reinforcing behavior.

ENTER: THE PLACE BEHAVIOR

Here we will discuss a passive approach to building a 'place' behavior. There is a more active way to teach this if your dog already knows the 'stay' behavior.

- identify a location in your kitchen and place a mat or dog bed on the floor. Ideally, this will be away from the counters and the table, but where Fido can still see you.
- Guide your dog over to the 'place' and reinforce him by tossing treats on to the mat one at a time if he continues to stay on the mat. You can use praise intermittently with the treats.
- Start with very short durations, and build up the time slowly. These sessions should be short and sweet in the beginning, and they shouldn't be while you are preparing food.



THE DOGGY DIGEST

TRAINING TIPS BROUGHT TO YOU BY MUTTS WITH MANNERS

The Conundrum of the Counter Surfing Canine

By Trelle Dandridge

- if Fido gets up, guide him back to the mat by tossing rewards on the mat. If you increased your time previously, drop back to an easier amount of time for Fido, and then begin increasing again, but more slowly this time.
- Once you have some fluency in this behavior, start practicing it with easy, quick meals. Grab an apple and sit at your table to eat it while tossing rewards to Fido for staying on his mat. Eventually, we will want to ask him to down on the mat so he can get more comfortable, and endure longer meals like lunch or dinner.
- Consistency is key. Keep working with Fido on 'place'. The more you practice it with him, the better he will get at it.

By understanding Fido's behavior (especially the ones we don't like), managing his environment, and giving him alternate spaces and access to rewards, he will learn over time to prefer his mat over counter tops and tables.

Until next time, keep it pawsitive!