

From haltering and leading, to toenail trimming and shearing, CAMELIDynamics guides alpaca owners to more efficient ways of handling their livestock, resulting in a minimum amount of stress for human and animal alike.

■ Computers and Camelids

Like it or not, I spend as much or more of my time at a computer these days as I do working with camelids. Based on many conversations, I believe I am not alone. Computers are a fact of life. Our vocabulary is peppered with new words that didn't exist even twenty years ago. People often come to camelids from disparate walks of life – many with no previous livestock experience, but a wealth of life experience – much of it on the computer.

In my work teaching training and handling techniques, I often think in and use metaphors and analogies as a way of helping people relate to the concepts I am teaching. I began to think about how the problems and solutions we encounter on our computer screens hit the handling nail right on the head (metaphor intended)! For example, who hasn't been caught in "screen saver" mode with mouth hanging open and eyes a bit glazed? How many boomers are feeling like the sum total of their life experience is leaving their brain/hard drive a bit full and in need of "defragging"?

Work arounds

While struggling with a computer issue the other day, I made the decision that I was not going to fix the problem and could live with a "work around." Later that day, I was having lunch with a friend and alpaca breeder. We were discussing a male alpaca she owns (whom we will euphemistically call "Oscar"). Oscar has been to several sessions of Camelidynamics Camelid Camp. Camelids come to camp for four days with their names clearly marked on their undies, and their favorite snacks. The human students work with the assembled animals and amazing transformations take place with both four- and two-leggeds. The last day is "parents' day" and the owners arrive in the afternoon to pick up their animals, learn about what we have been work-

ing on, and how to continue where we leave off.

While Oscar has made progress in many areas, his basic issue of extreme halter resistance persists. It occurred to me that a "work around" was not only practical, but also the best and safest course of action. Tackling a problem like this head on (pun intended) with repetition is akin to picking a scab or to use the computer metaphor is just exactly like the endless loops we find ourselves in when the same warning window appears each time we execute the same set of commands. It is no more logical to assume that an animal will magically change with rote repetition than to think that a computer will fix itself just because we are frustrated and want it to. Just as with a computer if you don't like what you get when you hit a key, don't keep hitting that key.

The more we humans insist on getting a halter on by wrestling and fighting with the animal, the more we unwittingly teach the alpaca to resist more effectively. Oscar is an animal who is determined he will *not* wear a halter unless he has no other choice. He is a big male, is very strong and agile, and is extremely frightened. My guess is that he is the victim of a particularly unpleasant, early haltering experience, perhaps innocently forced into a halter that didn't fit with a disastrous first leading experience.

Drowning victims

A young animal in a halter that doesn't fit who panics on a lead (or is tied to a static object) can easily pull the halter off of the nose bone. In this case, the halter can compress the cartilage and partially or fully block the airway. When animals can't breathe, they panic and struggle, ironically needing even more of what they can't get: AIR. When this happens accidentally, it is unfortunate. However, the deliberate training practice of haltering weanling



Marty and Camelidynamics Practitioner Julie Taylor Browe from England work to help Oscar overcome his fear of things around his head. The going was very slow. We were able to work through much of his reactivity to hands and a flat piece of nylon as shown in the photo, but he is quite certain that the “halter” itself is going to hurt him. In fact, he would react violently when we would attempt to work around his head with the halter.

alpacas and tying them to a fence to let them “sort it out” is not a safe training shortcut, in my opinion. The downside risk is creating what I call a “drowning victim.” Drowning victims are petrified of “THE HALTER” and will hurt themselves and anyone who tries to make them wear one... and just like Oscar, they are often very reasonable with other aspects of management.

Once haltered, Oscar is a dream to lead, easy to trim toenails, and surprisingly, once in balance, he will accept the TTouch* all over his face, nose, and

mouth. Issues that involve haltering or surprise movements around his head will cause this fellow to react suddenly and violently and he has connected more than once with the head of a person working with him.

We can't simply decide to never touch this animal again – it is time to accept a work around! In this case, I suggested to Oscar's owners we have two choices:

- 1) To put a halter on and leave it on. In some cases, the best way to do this may be with a sedative. Once haltered, we must periodically check the

* TTouch is a system of body work developed by Linda Tellington-Jones. Using a combination of specific touches, lifts, and movement exercises, TTouch helps to release tension and increase body awareness. This allows the animal to be handled without provoking typical fear responses. The animal can then more easily learn new and more appropriate behaviors. The TTouch restores confidence, helps an animal focus and helps to create a bond between handler and animal. For more information about the TTouch visit <http://www.ttouch.com>.



Photo courtesy of Marty Bennett

Trimming toenails while the alpaca is standing on them is a great work around. Most alpacas are remarkable unconcerned with having their toenails trimmed as long as you don't touch their legs. Put the alpaca in a confined area and reach in and trim. Remember to take smaller cuts – be conservative with how much you take off in one cut. Nibble away.

safety and comfort of the halter and make sure that the pasture is as safe as it can be... no hooks or wire left sticking out, etc. This is not a perfect solution but is a good option for an animal that must be shown or transported and a halter is not optional.

- 2) Use a different way of managing that doesn't involve a halter. As it turns out this is a perfectly fine solution for Oscar.

I firmly believe that this and many issues can benefit from a "work around." For example, when alpacas become absolutely unreasonable and determined that they will not allow a human to touch their legs I teach people to trim toenails while the animal is standing on them. Simply use the nippers to trim off the overgrown part of the toenail without picking the foot up at all. Trimming toenails on

the ground is a compromise, to be sure, but a perfectly fine "work around" (see photo above) and a perfectly acceptable alternative to a knock down, drag out fight.

Using a sedative when doing things that animals cannot tolerate without high levels of restraint is another "work around" that is absolutely reasonable and can be far safer in the long run. In order for an alpaca to let go of "looped behaviors" we must figure out a way to get the job done without doing things that reinforce the behaviors we wish to eliminate.

In the case of Oscar (and many more drowning victims that I have had the opportunity to work with) he is easy to lead and very cooperative. My suggestion for this fellow is to manage him using containment. Oscar can be led using a long lead rope attached to a collar placed as high on his neck as possible – this provides a reasonable amount of leverage and control. He can also be wormed,

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receive injections, and be shorn without using a halter. If he is to be used for breeding, the female can be brought to him, or the owners can use a laneway to herd him to a neutral breeding pen or use a combination of a lead rope attached to the top of the neck offering a reasonable amount of leverage and laneways to get him where he needs to go.

Computers & Alpacas

There are other computer metaphors that can help us understand our decidedly animate companions.

- **System freezes:** Ask an animal for too much too soon, or to do too many things at one time and we overload the system (think high strung weanling at a huge show) and it freezes. It is more efficient and safer to do periodic maintenance and ask for less... but when the system freezes there is nothing to be done but shut down and begin again. Backing up to much easier tasks with an animal can help to re-boot. When working with animals that are very resistant to having their toenails trimmed, I will often ask the animal to pick up and IMMEDIATELY put the foot down. I repeat this 15-20 times per foot before asking the animal to allow me to hold the foot up for even a second or two. Repetition of this SUCCESSFUL behavior will build lost confidence in the handler and reboot the behavior.
- **Fixes:** When attempting to diagnose a problem it may be better to address one thing at a time, instead of the scattershot approach we often take to problem solving. Trying too many fixes at the same time may result in a system crash or if you do manage to fix the problem you won't know which fix or combination of fixes did the trick.
- **User error:** Computer problems are just about always a result of user error, but we humans love to swear at and blame the machine. The same thing is true of our relationship with our animals... handler error is the cause of 99.9% of the difficulties we have with our woolly buddies and

just like a computer, animals don't lose any sleep over our decision that it is their fault! The sooner we realize that we bear the responsibility, the sooner we can set about figuring out the solution.

- **Garbage in, garbage out:** As wonderful as a computer is, the quality of the output is only as good as the input. Handle your animals well and you train them to do good things, handle your animals badly and you train them to do bad things. Using methods that are unkind and disrespectful seldom result in a truly good solution.
- **Incompatibility:** Load a MAC program on a PC or try to use a program that is too big for the capacity of the RAM and incompatibility becomes a problem. Some animals and some owners are just not a good fit and there is no shame in making that decision. One person's bane can be another's blessing. Some animals do better in a large herd, others in a small herd. Some alpacas are not cut out for the show ring regardless of how lovely they look. Some males are too aggressive to live in company, others are too easy going to be good breeders. Some females are not good mothers. Some animals are not appropriate for new owners. Recognizing and then accepting that you have an incompatibility issue can give you peace of mind.
That just about exhausts my list of computer comparisons. I think I will say so long, happy handling and go outside on this beautiful day to spend quality time with the alpacas!

For over 20 years, Marty McGee Bennett (B.S. Animal Behavior, University of Georgia) has traveled the world teaching camelid enthusiasts how to better understand and more successfully relate to these wonderful animals. The author of three books, including the best-selling *Camelid Companion*, and the star of seven instructional videos, Marty's work has transformed the way owners, breeders, and veterinarians handle and train alpacas. Marty can be reached at www.camelidynamics.com or marty@camelidynamics.com.