



DISTRACTIONS

The purpose of this lecture is to familiarize you with the concept of distractions as they affect the work of your Pilot Dog. The term “distractions” refers to things in the environment that take your dog’s focus off his work and his handler. This lesson will explain:

- Why dogs become distracted
- Types of commonly-encountered distractions
- The effect of distractions on a dog’s work
- How to manage distraction in a working dog

Why Dogs Become Distracted

It is important to understand that all dogs have some level of instinctive distraction that can take their minds off the task at hand. The things we refer to as distractions are completely normal dog behaviors in response to environmental stimuli. Most distractions occur in response to powerful dog instincts, and these instincts will need to be managed throughout the dog’s working life.

If your dog becomes distracted, it does not mean that the dog is untrained, should not be a Pilot Dog, or does not care about you; it just means that the dog is being a dog. In order to meet graduation standards at Pilot Dogs, a dog must consistently show the ability to control himself around distractions. While virtually all dogs will become distracted, you should feel confident by the time you leave class that you are able to manage the distraction and refocus the dog so that he can work safely.

Types of Commonly-Encountered Distractions

The following are the most common distractions that you may encounter while working with your Pilot Dog:

- Other dogs - Dogs are a highly social species. They want to meet and interact with other dogs. Your dog is most likely to be distracted by other dogs when the dogs are excited or aggressive, when they appear unexpectedly, or when they have an unfamiliar appearance (differences in size, shape, or color than Pilot Dog breeds).
- Small animals such as cats, birds, or squirrels - These animals all tend to move very quickly and trigger your dog's prey drive or desire to chase.
- Scent - Dogs have powerful noses, and it is very difficult for them not to use those noses to satisfy their curiosity about the environment while working. The dog may sniff the air while he is walking ("air scenting") or he may stop walking and put his nose to the ground ("ground scenting").
- Environmental food - Dogs evolved as scavengers. The dog's desire to grab available food in the environment is strong.
- People - Pilot Dogs were raised as part of a human family, and part of the reason they work is because they love people. Pilot Dogs are friendly, beautiful, and are very appealing to the public. Members of the public often distract working dogs by making eye contact with them, talking to them, or petting them.

The Effect of Distractions on a Dog's Work

Any of the above distractions may take your dog's attention off of his work. Signs that your dog is distracted by something may include:

- A sudden change of pace or pull (either suddenly pulling hard toward something, suddenly slowing, or stopping to look at something)
- Leaving the straight line of travel
- Body language that indicates distraction, such as suddenly wagging his tail

A distracted dog may make work errors that he does not usually make, such as bumping you into something or not stopping for a curb. It is not safe to follow a distracted dog that is pulling towards a distraction. You must regain the dog's attention using whatever approach is most effective for your individual dog.

How to Manage Distraction in a Working Dog

There are several different approaches to managing distraction; which one is most effective depends on your dog's temperament and your handling style. Your instructor will work with you on learning the most effective way to control distraction in your dog, but the following are the most common techniques used at Pilot Dogs:

- Verbal redirection - This can be effective when the dog is only mildly distracted, and sometimes the dog can be redirected to go back to work while still in motion.
- Obedience exercises - This requires you to stop forward motion and ask the dog to perform a series of quick sits and downs before resuming guidework. Obedience exercises can also be used when entering a new or stimulating environment to ensure that you have the dog's attention before asking him to guide you.
- Gentle Leader - If you can anticipate that a particular environment will be very distracting for your dog, it can be beneficial to have the Gentle Leader on the dog when you enter that environment.
 - Remember to never correct your dog with the Gentle Leader.
- Leash correction - Technique and strength of leash correction varies widely.
 - Leash corrections are sometimes warranted for high-level instinctive distractions, but should never be given with anger or frustration.

No matter what method you use to control distraction in your Pilot Dog, it is important that you always reward the dog with praise and/or food reinforcement once you have regained his attention, and he is focused on work again. Your instructor will work with you on the best way to reinforce good behavior with your dog.

Remember that the environment is full of things that are interesting to dogs, so you must put an effort into ensuring that you remain the most interesting thing to your dog.