Charging the Clicker

Clickers can come in various shapes and sizes, but in their simplest form, they are a small box with a wristband that makes a metallic "click" noise when you press down on it. This "click" noise is what's called the "marker," and it takes the place of you saying "yes," "good boy," "good girl," etc. You can certainly still use marker words such as "yes" if you prefer, but using a clicker will give your dog a clearer and more consistent signal between trainers, as one person's "yes" may sound very different than another's. All of the AWLA's protocols are written with the intention of using a clicker, but if you prefer not to, then just replace click with whichever marker word you prefer.

Initially, the sound the clicker makes means nothing to your dog. It's the same as if we were to hear a new sound for the first time: We will likely have a completely indifferent feeling and reaction to the new and novel sound; maybe at best we'd be curious. But once we make that new sound the alarm on our phone, it won't take long for us to become conditioned and attribute meaning to it. Before starting any of the protocols, we want to condition our dog to the sound of either the clicker or the marker word. Luckily, doing that is extremely easy.

Without being predictable, pair the click with a treat to create your marker. The treat should always come within 3 seconds after the click. Do this until the dog begins to offer behaviors or orients to the clicking noise and looks for the treat. In other words:

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click → treat
click → treat
click → treat
click → treat

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You have now taken a sound that means nothing to your dog (the clicking of the clicker, or the word "yes") and taught them that it predicts a reward. It would be the same as either the alarm sound on our phone, or if someone clapped and then gave you $100 afterwards. We already instantly reach for our phone when the alarm sounds, and it won't take long before hearing someone clap makes you hold out your hand.