

TRAINING PIGS TO EAT
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It seems silly doesn't it, for the need to train pigs to eat. They should come by this naturally, shouldn't they? Actually, pigs do come by the behavior of eating very naturally. But, it's that natural behavior that we must change in order to reach the pig's full genetic potential.

EATING BEHAVIOR

The average pig will consume about 11 to 13 meals per day, when offered feed from a self feeder. Usually, these meals are consumed during daylight hours, as pigs are diurnal (most active during daylight hours). Researchers have found that continuous lighting really does not affect total feed intake per day.

The number of pigs per feeder and per feeder space, the total space per pig, and the availability of water and the form of water delivery can influence feed intake patterns. But these factors will not influence the total amount of feed consumed per day, unless feeder access is impacted. That is, if there are too many pigs per feeder space, or too many pigs in a given pen space then access to the feeder may be impaired.

If that does happen, then pigs will demonstrate nocturnal feeding patterns. It boils down to time spent at the feeder and how much competition for feed and feeder space exists in the pen. In other words, if pigs cannot get to the feeder and consume sufficient feed to meet their energy requirements during the day, they will rise during the night and consume feed.

Other factors come into play such as social order, speed of consumption, and timid and/or aggressive eaters.

The social order of pigs dictates which pig(s) will be dominant at the feeder. Dominant pigs are usually very aggressive eaters. For example, if you are hand feeding 6 pigs in the same pen, there will be pigs that eat aggressively (fast), and subordinates that eat timidly (slowly); resulting in a direct correlation to growth rate.

Some pigs are fast eaters and some are slower eaters. The speed of consumption however, can be influenced by the presence of another pig. Competition at the feeder not only speeds up the time it takes to eat a meal, can influence the amount as well.

WATER

I cannot emphasize water intake enough. Water intake is directly related to feed intake, both the total amount per day and the speed at which a meal is consumed.

If your pig is not eating correctly, meaning if the pig has a low daily feed intake, look at the water source first. The water should be clean, fresh, and abundant. Water should never be a limiting factor. With all the dollars we spend on genetics, gas for our trucks, show supplies, and feed, water is by far the least expensive. Skimping on water and water quality will always result in an unsatisfactory outcome.

Water is also useful in getting pigs to eat faster and larger meals. Adding enough water to the pig's meal to produce a moist paste consistency will increase the speed at which the meal is consumed.

FEED DELIVERY

So, what does all of the above have to do with training pigs to eat the way YOU want them to eat? You have to overcome their natural instincts and eating habits or behavior in order to get them to consume the desired amount of feed you want in two meals per day.

Usually, pigs being fed for show are fed in one of 3 main methods:

1. self fed, where the pig decides when and how much to eat per day
2. hand fed, where the human owner decides when and how much the pig will eat per day
3. combination of 1 and 2 where the pig is generally fed via self feeder until it reaches about 100 to 150 lbs, and is then "hand fed" until show time

Number 1 is actually just feed delivery. By that I mean whether the pig eats from a self feeder or a hanging feeder, it determines how feed per day it will consume.

For clarification, number 2 above does not mean the feeder has continuous feed in the feeder. This would actually more like number 1 above. The number 2 feeding method would mean the pig eats two meals per day; morning and evening.

It is important that when you want to limit growth rate (slow or hold) that the pig is already trained to consume two meals, about 10 minutes per meal. Or, you will be extremely frustrated trying to get pigs to consume the amount and type of feed products that YOU want them to consume.

One of the frequent things I hear is "my pigs don't like Powerfill". When I inquire further, usually the pig has recently been taken off of full feed (whether self feeder or hanging feeder) and introduced to HONOR® Show Chow® Powerfill™ on a "cold turkey" basis.

Powerfill is very different in taste and texture as compared to pelleted showpig feeds. Powerfill contains ground beet pulp which causes it to be a bit "gritty" to the pig. So, naturally the pig is going to refuse to eat when Powerfill is introduced in this manner. Or, when attempting to topdress Powerfill, if too much is offered at one time and the pig is being full fed, it may reject Powerfill.

It is important to note here that hand feeding is very different from limit feeding. Hand feeding is merely the exhibitor or the pig's owner determining how much feed to place in a feeder (of any type) per day. Limit feeding is giving the pig less than it wants to eat per day (usually somewhat less than 90% of what normal feed intake).

So, if you are giving a 100 lbs pig 4 lbs of feed in the morning, and there is still some feed left in the feeder that evening, and you give the pig another 2 to 4 lbs of feed; you are NOT limit feeding. The pig is determining how much it will eat per day.

If you are feeding in this manner and attempt to include Powerfill as a topdress, the pig will more than likely reject it. The pig needs be to cleaning up each meal in about 10 minutes or less. If the pig is doing this, then it becomes much easier to introduce topdresses, Powerfill, beet pulp and other types of supplements.

TRAINING THE PIG

It is much easier if you train the pig to eat what you desire at an early age (or lighter weight). If you wait until the pig is much heavier (over 200 lbs) and older, the bigger the battle will be in training.

My philosophy is as simple as this, I want the pig to eat what I want, not what it wants. And, I recognize that at times this may not be easy. Instead of giving the pig the choice to eat how much and what kind of feed (or topdresses) to eat, I give it one choice, eat or be hungry. I assure you that pigs do not like being hungry, and it doesn't take long for them to change their minds and submit.

For example, if I decided to transition the pig from a self feeder to being limit fed with Powerfill in the diet (along with pellets), I would take these steps:

1. remove the self feeders completely from the pen and use a hanging type feeder
2. remove the feeder about 10 – 12 hours prior to the first hand fed meal
3. offer a "half" feeding for the initial meal (if you want to feed 2 lbs per feeding, offer 1 lbs for the first feeding)

4. give the pig 10 minutes to clean the feed up, and then completely remove any feed left in the feeder
5. do the same for the second feeding
6. if the pig ate poorly for the 1st and 2nd meals, usually it will eat very well during the 3rd meal
7. meals should be about 10 – 12 hours apart, at the same time(s) every day
8. do NOT leave feed in the feeder after 10 minutes, it will make things extremely difficult to train the pig if you do
9. when the pig consumes all of the feed offered increase the next feeding to a full meal
10. if the pig is eating slowly, I suggest hand or limit feed another pig in close proximity to get the first pig to increase the speed of intake - (you want the second pig to make the first pig eat faster, but not have access to it's feed; so make sure there is a barrier between the pigs....but one they can see through)

It is critical that you train the pig to eat what you put in the feeder in about 10 minutes or less. Doing this will enable you to put topdresses, beet pulp, and etc... in and out of the pig's diet with ease.

This is critical because to help fulfill the genetic potential of your pig, you may need to tweak the diet several times in a short period as you near show time. If you see the pig is in need of muscle, cover, rib shape, fill, or whatever you must have the ability for the pig to eat whatever you put in the feeder in order to change the outcome of the pig.

At times, these dietary changes must be done daily until you have the pig headed in the direction you desire. If the pig constantly balks at what you are attempting to feed, it cannot look the best on show day.

Keep in mind that the pig's appearance as it steps into the show ring is of vital importance. Getting the pig to peak physical appearance (or 12:00 o'clock) depends upon what it eats and how it eats.

You have a great deal of influence over what the pig looks like as it is being judged. Just as you train the pig to respond to your direction in the show ring, you should also train your pig to eat to maximize genetic potential.

Keep in mind that everything you do at home, or choose not to do, will ultimately end up in the show ring. Work hard, show hard, and have fun with your showpig project.