METHODS (continued)

Providing Oral Treatments

Oral antibiotic treatments and supplements which have a fruity or sweet flavor are often perceived as a treat by minipigs, which means treatments can also be an opportunity for socialization with human caretakers (Figures 5 & 6). Caretakers rub and pat the minipigs during treatment to promote a bond and help establish trust.

Introducing a Clicker at Feeding

Many facilities utilize operant conditioning to facilitate easier handling and to provide enrichment to the minipigs. A clicker is often used to mark behaviors (Figure 7), and therefore it is beneficial for the minipig to identify the “click” with a food reward. Minipigs are highly motivated by food, and feeding time is highly rewarding to the pigs. In our production facility, we utilize automated feeders and can feed an entire room at the same time by releasing a lever. Therefore, we click the clicker before releasing the lever so the pigs learn to associate the sound of the click with feeding and something positive. The motivation is to reduce the need to “charge the clicker” (Cox, 2010) before beginning a clicker training program.

RESULTS

Our socialization program has helped to improve the temperaments of the minipigs and reduce the number of animals who do not tolerate handling well. Because pigs are prey species in the wild, they remain extremely restless and form strong bonds with the technician working in their area, which can result in stressful situations. However, we have found that taking a few seconds to open the pen and pet the animals only adds a few minutes to the task overall, and allows us to provide routine interaction and socialization.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

Every person who interacts with the animals is influencing what they learn and experience, either purposefully or inadvertently. Our caretakers and research technicians all contribute to creating positive experiences and enhancing the well-being of the animals (Zeltner, 2013). Minipigs are highly intelligent and remember positive and negative experiences with those who care for them. A lack of human interaction or negative experiences can create minipigs that are fearful or even aggressive (Bull, 2012).

Socialization is a continual process as minipigs grow within our production facility as well as when they transition to a new environment, such as the laboratory. Consistent positive handling is important for laboratory minipigs and can easily be incorporated into routine tasks without requiring much additional time.

REFERENCES