



How to Choose a Mystery Shopping Company

Mystery Shopping companies range from the truly excellent to the other end of the spectrum. Many businesses who recognise the need for a mystery shopping program find there is little information available on what they should be looking for and how to choose the best one. Here are some practical tips on how to distinguish between companies so that you can choose the best one for your business.

LOOK AT THEIR QUESTIONNAIRES

Ask to see a sample questionnaire in your industry area. This will give you a really good idea of the expertise of the mystery shopping provider. Some things to look for:

- How long are the questionnaires? (long questionnaires are the less likely they are to get accurate information. Rule of Thumb – more than 4 pages is too much.)
- Is each question (or checklist item) asking for a specific item of information? Are items within questions related? And is the information being asked for something that the shopper can accurately give information on? Do questions cover all possible responses? Will the answers give you information you can work with?
- Look at the shopper instructions. Do they follow the ‘flow’ of the visit? Or are they presented in reporting categories. Do they use photos & images to show what to look for?
- Is there a wide range of question type, or are they limited to yes / no & text. Are ‘NetPromoter’ & scale 1 - 10 type questions available?

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- Are there delayed questions to test for recall of promotions? And to get a true picture of the customer experience?

Good

Did the salesperson
(Tick all that apply)

- Greet you politely?
- Smile & make eye contact?
- Say welcome to Xbusiness?
- Ask how they could help you?
- None of the above.

Bad

Was the salesperson happy to talk to
you? (Choose one only)

- No, they were not (0)
- Yes, they were mildly (1)
- They were busy but handled my enquiry (2)
- Yes, they were very happy (3)
- They asked for my name in order to build rapport (4)

LOOK AT THEIR REPORTS

Have a look at the reports they are proposing, and ask to either see a live demonstration or get a login to a demonstration system. Some things to check:

- Are all reports online within 24 hours?
- Are all reports QA'd before release?
- Are reports dynamically generated? Or are they static?
- Are there online graphing and trend analysis tools?
- Can you easily change question and area weightings, and apply retrospectively?
- Do they come from a software package and are a mass of figures, with a claimed decimal place accuracy that cannot be supported by fact? (see sample below)

For Client - Demo Company
From 01-Aug-2006 To 30-Nov-2006

Score: 69.47%

Demo Survey

Sections	Score	Possible	Pct
01. Outside	245	315	77.77 %
02. The Bar	135	290	46.55 %
03. The Food Service	322	485	66.39 %
04. The Food Quality	420	525	80.00 %
05. Descriptions			%
Totals	1122	1615	

Categories	Score	Possible	Pct
01. Cleanliness	171	285	60.00 %
02. Courtesy	119	180	66.11 %
03. Marketing	25	65	38.46 %
04. N/A	70	170	41.17 %
05. Quality	341	420	81.19 %
06. Service	100	105	95.23 %
07. Speed	296	390	75.89 %
Totals	1122	1615	

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SHOPPERS

The shoppers are the 'front line' staff and much depends on the quality of their work. Some areas to look at are:

- How they select shoppers. If they rely on a small pool of 'professional' shoppers you are not getting the true customer's opinion and experience. While it may be a dream job, it's not going to get your business real information from real customers. At the opposite end of the spectrum, be wary if they accept all comers. You need a wide range of shoppers, but you only want those who are reliable, good observers and can write good reports, so you need a mystery shopping company that has a good selection process, and ongoing monitoring.
- How they train their shoppers. If there is no training and assessment program in place then the quality of the shoppers, and the quality of the information they provide cannot be relied on.
- How they pay their shoppers. If you are paying your shoppers a paltry \$3 - \$4 per shopping job, you are not giving them the incentive to do a good job. Look for a company that guarantees a minimum of \$20 (plus purchase) per assignment.
- How they manage their shoppers. If there is not a preferred shopper program in place then there is no mechanism for improving the quality of the shoppers. The best companies assess the shopper and provide feedback on every shopping assignment, and then use that assessment to determine access to jobs is necessary.

ASSIGNMENTS

How they assign work is extremely important. Some possibilities are:

- Posting the job on a website for shoppers to 'grab'. While this is used extensively, it is guaranteed to get you a shopper who is not matched to your customer base, and has no motivation to do a good job.
- There are 'career' shoppers, or a 'small pool of trained / expert shoppers'. Again, you are not going to get demographically-matched shoppers, or real customer reactions.
- Individual assignments, where a shopper is selected individually for each job. This way shoppers can be demographically matched, selected on merit and they know that doing a good job means they increase their chances of getting more work.

Selecting a company that individually assigns demographically-matched shoppers is the only way that you can rely on the information they provide. Information obtained from a company that does not do this should be treated, at best, as irrelevant and, at worst, as actively harmful.

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SOFTWARE AND SYSTEMS

If a mystery shopping company relies on an off-the-shelf software package then there will be limitations on what the software can do, and how much change can be permitted.

Similarly, a company that relies on an external development company for its systems has the same restrictions. Look for a company who has developed their own systems, and who is able to be flexible, and to change with you as your company and your needs change.

CHANGES TO PROGRAMS

Check what happens if you want to make changes to your mystery shopping program.

What happens to your existing data? Can it be integrated? And what are the cost implications? Are changes included?

HOW TO CHOOSE

The quality of the information from your mystery shopping program depends on the knowledge and expertise of the company. While it can be difficult for businesses to know what to look for in a mystery shopping provider these points, together with our “Mystery Shopping Checklist’ provide a great way to make sure that you are asking all the right questions and making the best decision.

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