

What Mystery Shopping Misses

If you're looking for a way to verify your employees are following procedures you've set out for them, mystery shopping is a viable option. However, if you're trying to evaluate your customer service levels, you're making a mistake. Here's why.

Mystery shopping is like a "pop inspection." It's a way for management to check whether employees are adhering to defined policies, procedures and training. Mystery shoppers are hired to enter a store, restaurant or bank branch with a pre-determined set of criteria to evaluate and score. They assume the role of a customer in order to rate their experience based on the checklist you've given them.



So what's the problem here? Well, first of all, how do you know if real customers even care about the things you're asking mystery shoppers to look for? More importantly, what if you're completely missing what really bothers them? **You're spending money on a program that replicates customer experiences when you could actually be capturing them.** Even if you've asked your own customers to do the mystery shopping, those who are willing to participate typically already like your company and their assessments may not reflect what the majority of customers think and feel.

This is where mystery shopping falls short.

It's fake.

Mystery shopping is in its essence a fabricated experience. Mystery shoppers are watching your employees to see if they're following the script you've written for them. This may not be the experience customers are really looking for, and the shopper is conducting business with a mindset that's completely different from what your typical customer would have. Real customers don't keep score while they do business with you...unless they've been hired to do so.

It's not representative.

Mystery shoppers are usually recruited based on a profile that matches your customers. However, that may not always be the case. Even if your own customers are used as mystery shoppers, this is a small percentage of your customer base and any feedback you get doesn't represent your entire customer population.

It's incentive-driven.

Let's face it—mystery shoppers are doing it for the money. Even if they are well-trained and good at what they do, they are interacting with your employees with a specific agenda in mind. It's possible they will provide feedback they believe you (or your vendor) are looking for in order to stay on a long-term contract. Intentional or not, mystery shoppers are not always honest.



It's biased.

Timing can have a big impact on how business experiences occur for both mystery shoppers and actual customers. The day, time and season can all dramatically affect the outcome of interactions with employees. Most mystery shopping research can't be considered statistically significant because it doesn't include enough episodes to eliminate this bias. That also means it's unfair to judge employees' overall performance based on a single shop.

It's obvious.

Often companies notify their district managers of the time period within which a shop will occur. This information is fed down the chain because everyone wants good results. Employees and managers tend to be "on" during this period, especially with what they know is on the checklist. If asked, a lot of managers will even tell you they can spot a mystery shopper a mile away. Are you looking for long-term results or a short-term period of adherence to your policies?

So what's the option?

Mystery shopping alone can't ensure your employees are representing your brand well and meeting customers' needs. Plus, changing processes or assessing employee performance based on the input of a few mystery shoppers who evaluated a single experience at a single point in time can be a dangerous strategy. Only customers can tell you what they really think.

Post-transaction customer surveys provide insight into how your employees and processes are perceived so you can make decisions that have a real impact on satisfaction and loyalty. You can be confident any initiatives you launch will be valued by a large cross-section of your customer base, not just a few.

The best customer satisfaction measurement programs give you immediate, actionable, reliable feedback over time so you can track trends and see the effects of new initiatives. With the right tools, you can focus your employees' efforts where they're most likely to improve results.

Mystery Shopping vs. Customer Surveys	
HOW ARE YOU EVALUATING YOUR CUSTOMER SERVICE?	
Mystery Shopping	Customer Satisfaction Surveys
Scripted experiences	Authentic, unscripted customer experiences
Evaluations from a few non-customers or a small set of engaged customers	Evaluations from a broad set of customers who reflect your entire customer population
Identifies employees' adherence to the standards you have established	Measures customers' assessment of your service and how you are meeting their needs
Subject to timing biases depending on day, time and season	Ongoing measurement ensures representation across days, times and seasons
When detected by employees, can lead to short-term performance spikes	Random sampling of customer experiences over time encourages consistent employee behavior

The MSR Group is a nationally known, full-service market research company specializing in the measurement and improvement of customer satisfaction and advocacy. To learn more about customer feedback programs, contact us at 1.800.737.0755 or visit our website at www.theMSRgroup.com.