

WHAT'S SO MYSTERIOUS ABOUT MYSTERY SHOPPERS: UNDERSTANDING THE QUALIFICATIONS AND SELECTION OF MYSTERY SHOPPERS

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As the world becomes more globalized, more options are being sought to provide a competitive advantage, with one of the most common being the delivery of high service quality [6]. When measuring service quality, mystery shopping has been identified as an effective tool to evaluate a company's service quality from the perspective of the customer [5]. This paper used content analysis of academic and industry reports to better understand the requirements of mystery shopping from the perspective of the Service Operator (SO), notably in the restaurant sector.

The mystery shopping concept is not new to the service industry [9; 10]. A service provider "hires" a shopper to secretly observe specific service processes and procedures, to capture the service experience in detail while it unfolds. The shoppers are to collect specifically identified issues to subsequently submit an extensive report about the observations conducted. The literature has identified that the service industry recognizes the importance of mystery shopping [3; 7; 8; 9]. Companies use mystery shopping as a diagnostic tool to measure service quality. Excellent mystery shopping reports monitor customers' behavior and preferences, observe employees' action and reaction, competence and attentiveness, and benchmark products and services with competitors [1]. Today's rivalry for new customers, combined with the pressure to keep old clients while constantly updating product lines and service standards makes mystery shopping a valuable tool to assess quality and service.

SOs can either hire mystery shoppers from within their own company or hire a market research company who provides independent, external mystery shoppers. Even though there are a few advantages of using one's own staff as mystery shoppers, especially when benchmarking against competitors, the disadvantages prevail [1]. To use mystery shoppers assigned to a job by a market research firm bares with it the paramount elements of mystery shoppers: independent,

unbiased, and anonymous reviews. However, regardless if internal or external mystery shoppers, the selection of a qualified mystery shopper is of extreme importance when conducting an accurate evaluation of a service process [4]. The quality of a mystery shopping report depends on the mystery shoppers' qualifications, their knowledge of the industry, and their observation, data collection, and reporting skills [2]. Some of the top criteria for a mystery shopper, as per the extant literature, include the use of objective measurements [9], having well defined goals [7], and ensuring the anonymity of the shopper [1].

This research paper aims to compile selection and qualification criteria for mystery shoppers, organizing the main points into the thematic areas of 'Personal Traits', 'Training', and 'Company Consideration'. Elements under 'Personal Traits' are the innate characteristics which constitute an effective mystery shopper and include an individual's ethical behavior as well as dependability and reliability. These traits cannot be taught but are instead part of an individual's personality. 'Training', on the other hand, relate to traits that can be taught to potential mystery shoppers, which include ensuring anonymity, memory recall techniques, reporting styles, data collection skills, and industry knowledge. If an individual wishes to be a mystery shopper but does not possess a 'Personal Trait', little can be done to accommodate them. However, if they are missing a 'Training Trait', the individual can undergo training to learn the required trait. 'Company Consideration' refers to elements that Mystery Shopping Companies (MSCs) must think about and influence in order to produce an effective evaluation. Such elements include the MSCs' responsibility to provide objective measurements, clear goals, incentives, and to ensure mystery shoppers match the customer profile, and respect time constraints.

The qualification of a mystery shopper will ultimately be judged by how well his/her report is compiled and written. This indicates that it is the SO's responsibility to ensure that the MSC receives the required guidance and support to hire a mystery shopper who is adequately qualified, trained, and provided with specific information in order to collect all data professionally and compile a report on point and on time.

The results of the content analysis in this paper can facilitate a clearer understanding of mystery shopping requirements and recruitment best practice from industry and academia. In addition, the findings contained herein will enable a SO to identify what a mystery shopper needs and should have in order to submit an effective mystery shopping report. For example, it is essential to provide memory-recall training or techniques to potential mystery shoppers. Furthermore, the

provision of clear goals and objective measurements should be considered partially, if not fully, to ensure the mystery shopper has all the required information when evaluating which, in return, guarantees that the SO receives useful feedback from the mystery assignment. A failure to provide such measures could result in inaccurate, complicated and excessively subjective observations, recommendations, and policy changes. The practical implication of this report is to provide SOs, particularly restaurant managers, with a set of qualifiers/criteria to assist in the mystery shopper selection process and to encourage SOs to be pro-active, clear and consistent when hiring mystery shoppers.

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