

# **Now more than ever**

## **Why mystery shopping is crucial in today's unstable times**

**By: John Swinburn**

Editor's note: John Swinburn is the president of the Mystery Shopping Providers Association.

A sluggish economy, widespread layoffs, and other significant factors have laid the foundation for a weak economic year. Companies are looking for efficient ways to obtain information, decrease travel costs, analyze competitors and fine-tune their business operations.

Solving these problems is the job of the mystery shopping industry. Sadly, many companies — particularly smaller companies — are not aware of how mystery shopping can benefit them, and how in the midst of a sluggish economy, they can use mystery shoppers to help their companies thrive.

Below are three scenarios we have experienced in recent weeks that give executives at all levels a firsthand account of how mystery shopping can benefit a company, and help them thrive in lean times.

### **Flight anxiety**

Thousands of Americans, from top-level executives on down to families separated by great distances, have expressed a concern about flying. While tough for the airlines, it's even more difficult for businesses that must meet goals, but often do so without dispatching a key worker to hop from location to location to location. One year ago, it was not uncommon for consultants and executives to plan weekly road trips from site to site; today however, many businesses simply don't want to put employees or themselves in an awkward situation.

For these and others, mystery shopping presents a practical alternative.

Top mystery shopping firms employ pools of talent in cities across the country. With a little creativity, a management tour or site survey can be arranged through a mystery shopping firm. Working directly with mystery shopping executives, corporate leaders can outline key criteria, standards and goals for a visit.

Take for example the executive with a national retail chain. Her job usually includes regular visits to examine all functions within her operations area. Her firm however, has concerns about their executives traveling — but still must meet the same financial, supply, marketing, and sales goals.

This executive can turn to a mystery shopping firm to resolve the situation. Paired with a team of experts within her operations area, the executive could first outline her goals for the visit, and then detail with the team of mystery shoppers exactly how to achieve them.

In this situation, mystery shoppers offer a range of services, including marketing analysis, store examinations, shopper profiles, inventory controls and surveys about customer service personnel and consumer interactions.

### **Improving customer service**

Companies are not alone in navigating through tough economic times. Consumers in cities across the country are growing uneasy — and sales figures reflect this. Add the competition from online and television shopping outlets and traditional retail outlets face tough times. The situation is often more difficult for smaller mom-and-pop operations that are not located in a high traffic area.

For stores to lure shoppers back, they must focus on the core shopping experience and on treating their customers well.

An example: With consumers spending less, stores must step up even higher than their competition in order to generate income from a smaller pool of customers. Many retailers fall back on the basics — including top-notch customer service.

Determining just what level of service to offer, how it compares to other stores, and how much it will cost is a job in itself. Mystery shoppers are well-suited for this role. Working with company executives, they can determine what is lacking, and what is needed — and most importantly, what customers want.

A second role of mystery shoppers in this scenario is their work directly with employees. The customer experience may be shaped by the “goodies” given, or services offered, but the customer will remember much longer the treatment received by store employees. This survey however, is usually best handled by an objective third party.

Mystery shoppers can play an integral role in helping stores administer a quality control operation on their most important asset: their people. Shoppers often reward employees on the spot who go beyond the call, take extra time with customers, or make any accommodation to help a customer. Time and again, this tactic has proven successful for companies looking to get an edge on the competition.

### **New industries**

Traditional retail and service companies are not alone in suffering through tough economic times — and they are not alone in their use of mystery shoppers.

Another key sector where mystery shoppers play a key role is in the non-traditional service sector. These new industries are making an increasing number of requests for mystery shopping services, all with the same goal in mind — delivering the best customer service to consumers.

Financial service companies, banks, automotive, insurance and real estate businesses all rely on new customers to keep their businesses booming. These firms need accurate feedback from customers, from shoppers and from associates about their service and effectiveness. Mystery shopping can be an effective way to obtain this information and disseminate it to company decision-makers.

Today, mystery shoppers are being used by corporations large and small to monitor all levels of the customer relationship. In an era when every customer's dollar counts, mystery shoppers are proving again that the most powerful weapon in business is information.

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