

Reading Lesson

B1+ Services: Mystery Shopping

Reading

Read the text. Are mystery shoppers beneficial?

Mystery Shopping

One of the challenges that all businesses face is quality control. For a business that manufactures goods, quality control may require a particular stage in the production process where a random selection of the goods is examined. But what about businesses that provide service, such as stores or restaurants? One way of evaluating the quality of service is to ask customers about their experience through questionnaires. This is an important part of many businesses' customer service strategy. There are problems with this approach, though. Customer surveys often have a very low response rate, and those who respond are often only the ones who had a particular difficulty. While it can be useful to be aware of those issues, surveys alone may not give a full picture of the overall quality of service. Increasingly, businesses are using another method of assessing the service they provide: mystery shoppers.



Mystery shoppers pretend to be service users and then report on their experiences. As the name suggests, this may involve going into a retail outlet as a customer and buying something, often from a range of products that the business wants to check on. In a world where online shopping is so easy and common, stores need to be confident that they are offering a positive experience to the customer who visits their brick-and-mortar store. To assess this, the mystery shopper goes through the experience in the same way any other customer would, making notes on particular aspects, such as time waiting in line or interactions with staff. Some mystery shoppers even wear hidden cameras to record their experiences. The mystery shopper produces a report, which outlines the main positives and negatives of the experience. Mystery shoppers aren't limited to the world of retail, though, and they are used by businesses ranging from restaurants and fast-food chains to health clubs and movie theaters. They are even used by local governments in some countries to evaluate the effectiveness of the services they provide to the people in their area. Businesses benefit from this approach in a number of ways. It should lead to a more balanced assessment of the average service user's experience rather than a picture that emphasizes those who have negative experiences. The positive aspects that are identified may lead to bonus payments for staff. Any negative aspects help a business to identify training needs so that staff performance can improve. Some businesses even employ mystery shoppers to visit competitors so that they can see how their offer to the customer compares and act accordingly.

Not everyone feels that mystery shoppers are a good idea. Ethical concerns have been raised about some aspects of the mystery shopper service. On one level, the mystery shopper is deceiving workers, which might be seen to be unfair when a worker's bonus, or even their job itself, may be at risk. Another concern is that the people employed to perform the mystery shopper role are often students or others who may not have a high level of training and who are paid little. This may have an effect on the quality of the report received.

In order to address these concerns, many businesses that employ mystery shoppers ensure that staff are aware that the service user in front of them may be a mystery shopper. These businesses also tend to employ specialist mystery shopper companies so that they can be sure of the quality of information they receive from the process. In addition, some areas, such as some American states, require mystery shoppers to be licensed, and anyone who acts as a mystery shopper without a license can be fined.

quality control (n): regular tests to make sure that products or services are good enough

Reading Lesson

Vocabulary

Choose the correct option.

- Some businesses ... products, while others offer services.
a manufacture b manipulate c manifest
- Businesses need to ... their services to see where they can improve.
a provide b process c evaluate
- When you ... to be someone else, you behave like that person.
a copy b act c pretend
- An extra payment you get at work for good performance is a ...
a promotion. b benefit. c bonus.
- When you worry if something is fair and right, you have ... concerns about it.
a logical b ethical c financial

Comprehension

Choose *True* or *False*.

- One problem with customer surveys is that few people complete them. **True / False**
- Mystery shoppers interview other customers about their experiences. **True / False**
- Paragraph 4 describes some drawbacks of mystery shopping. **True / False**
- Mystery shoppers are always highly trained and experienced. **True / False**
- Some businesses provide expert mystery shoppers to other businesses. **True / False**

Thinking

What personal qualities do you think it takes to be a good mystery shopper?