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Mystery Shoppers: An Evaluation of their use in monitoring service performance

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine what mystery shopping is, why it is used and how mystery customers are trained and how the information collected is fed back to the client organisation.

Design/methodology/approach – The approach was to use an on-line survey of mystery shoppers compares the reality of the situation with the best practice identified from the literature.

Findings – The main outcome was that results identify good and bad practices in all areas of the process and guidelines for the recruitment, training and monitoring of mystery shoppers are proposed including in-depth training in all aspects of the job.

Practical implications - Mystery Shoppers are used worldwide by services to evaluate the performance of their front-line people and processes but are their evaluations valid and reliable? This research identifies good and bad practice which should help managers to design their training for mystery shoppers.

Originality / value- The paper addresses a gap in the literature on the perceptions of mystery shoppers.

Keywords: Service quality, Mystery customers, validity and reliability.

Paper type Research

1.0 Introduction

Service managers have traditionally used service standards to manage the service delivery process. First they set the standard and then they measure performance against that standard, taking action when standards have not been met. The main difficulties with monitoring performance are associated with the heterogeneous nature of services, their perishability, their blend of tangible and intangible elements and the fact that consumption takes place simultaneously with production (Fitzsimmons, 2012). It is this simultaneity of production and consumption in particular that has added to the complexity of monitoring what is now commonly referred to as the Moment Of Truth. This means that the customer is present and therefore part of the delivery process and able to interact to varying degrees with the service provider. One method for monitoring this Moment Of Truth and the processes and standards that support it that has increased in popularity in recent years is the use of Mystery Shoppers or Mystery Customers as they are sometimes called. This study focuses on what the experience of mystery shopping is like for the mystery shopper. It examines recruitment and training, the evaluation visit, data collection, reporting methods and feedback, as well as the reliability and validity of this particular method of obtaining customer intelligence in order to determine its effectiveness. These aims will be achieved by examining the literature on mystery shopping and by reporting the results and analysis of a survey of mystery shoppers undertaken to gather their views on what they do and how they do it.

2.0 Mystery Shopping

2.1 What is Mystery Shopping

Wilson (1998a) defines mystery shoppers as researchers who “act as customers or potential customers to monitor the quality of processes and procedures used in the delivery of a service (p.414). Xu and He (2014) found that this method has been in use since the 1940s. The emphasis is on the service experience as it unfolds, looking at which activities and procedures which do or do not happen rather than gathering opinions” (p. 415). The aim is to obtain facts rather than perceptions. In their research into mystery shopper protocol, Peterman and Young (2015) observed that mystery shoppers documented their experiences in order to provide a unique perspective on the situation.

Mystery shopping is an example of concealed participant observation in a public setting (Calvert, 2005). It uses a structured approach of checklists and codes to gather and measure specific information about service

performance in everyday encounters (Grove and Fisk, 1992). Mystery shopping data are not used to evaluate individual performance and so findings are always reported on an anonymous basis (Kehagias *et al.* 2011). Mystery shopping involves a mystery shopper making exact checks against specified criteria (usually standards of service) whilst being provided with a service, whereas, retrospective customer research relies on what the customer can recall, making it more subjective and less reliable and accurate. It could be argued that real customers surveyed at a later date cannot recall their experiences exactly and will therefore, offer only subjective perceptions of them (Finn and Kayande, 1999). Mystery shopping may take a number of forms such as branch visits, telephone calls and email checks in order to measure compliance with processes, systems and standards of service.

2.2 Why use mystery shopping

Mystery shopping is seen as an efficient and effective instrument to gain in-depth knowledge of the customer's perception of service delivery (Finn, 2001). If an organisation is communicating the expectations of management and customers through standards of service then there is a need to measure performance against these standards so that an organisation can ensure that it is delivering what it promises and maintaining its competitive position. This is particularly true when dealing with the performance of sales staff whose job it is to sell products and services to customers (Ramesh, 2010). Mystery shopping is a technique that can do this as it aims to collect facts rather than perceptions. These facts can relate to almost any aspect of the service transaction covering topics such as number of rings before the telephone was answered, length of time in a queue, number of checkouts open and the form of greeting used. They can include more complex encounters such as a loan application or a request to open a bank account where the procedures adopted can be assessed in terms of service quality and financial compliance (Wilson, 1998b). It is the quality of the collected data that differentiates this technique from other means of evaluation.

The extant literature on mystery shopping has identified a number of other advantages associated with the technique. Mystery shopping results can be used as a diagnostic tool to identify failings or weaknesses in procedures and processes, to encourage, develop and motivate staff and to assess an organisation's competitiveness by benchmarking them against others in the same sector (Wilson, 1998b). Erstad (1998, p.34) linked mystery shopping techniques to "building a team spirit, evaluating/identifying training needs, providing feedback, and linking performance to incentives and rewards." It can bring immediate service improvements with continuous improvement possibilities (Cabinet Office, 2004). It can also be used to measure the effectiveness of training programmes (Morrison *et al.*, 1997) and checking whether all customers are treated equally (Morrall, 1994, Tepper, 1994). Thus, what Berry *et al.*, (1988) describe as the service-quality loop of service standards, employee performance, training and rewards can all be linked by using mystery shopper evaluations in a positive way.

However, there are some disadvantages to using mystery shoppers, such as employees may view the evaluation process as threatening in that they may perceive it as the management "spying" upon them, with a view to instigating disciplinary action for any mistakes they make, rather than as a trigger to improve staff training (Erstad, 1998). It reviews processes not their outcomes (Wilson, 1998a) and this can be problematic for many services, for example, the service was excellent but the meal was inedible. However, some organisations have now started to examine outcomes, particularly where there is a tangible element involved. For example fast food chains are now evaluating the meal – the outcome of the service. If used as an ongoing or regular method of evaluation it will result in a constant need for mystery shoppers. This will inevitably utilise staff time, impact on training and also on finances particularly where an external agency is used. Furthermore, staff can become complacent about the level of service they provide after the novelty of being mystery shopped wears off (Wilson, 1998a). Memory demands placed on assessors could affect the accuracy of the information obtained (Morrison *et al.*, 1997). As is the case with all sampling techniques it offers a snapshot of the service process, which may not be representative (Cabinet Office, 2004). It has been suggested that mystery shopping violates the principle of informed consent, as staff are not aware at any stage that they are being observed and their behaviours monitored. According to good research practice subjects should be protected through the practice of informed consent (Silverman, 2000). Subjects have the right to know they are being observed. Another potential problem is staff attempting to play "spot the mystery shopper". However, this can be alleviated to a certain extent by making the assignment brief as credible as possible and by not using the same shoppers every time. These issues can affect the reliability of mystery shopping as a technique to measure customer service. It is the reliability and validity issues that are examined in the next section.

2.3 Validity and Reliability

Mystery shopping is a form of participant observation, albeit that the observation is carried out secretly (Calvert, 2005). Jesson (2004) with particular reference to pharmacy practice questioned whether mystery shopping techniques were methodologically sound ways of collecting data on performance. Specifically, the method and sample sizes have been criticised from reliability and validity aspects. In order for the data to be valid and reliable Hesselink and Van der Wiele (2003) argued that the mystery shopping study had to be well-designed with particular attention on the process itself, the data gathering process, the person doing the study (the mystery shopper) and the reporting process. Finn and Kayende (1999) examined the psychometric quality of mystery shopping data and concluded that the data collected held up to reliability and validity tests particularly when compared to data collected from customer surveys. With regards to the generalisability of the data Collins and Turner (2005) argued that although sample sizes were small, each observation was valid in its own right since it was a "snap-shot" of the service experience at one moment in time and as such was not trying to represent the "population" of all such experiences.

A mystery shopper will visit an establishment, note whether standards are being met and then complete an evaluation feedback form later and in private. This procedure relies on the assessors' memory, and two problems can arise from memory failures on their part. Firstly, an assessor may forget to check attainment of one or more standards on the list, i.e. not complete the assignment brief fully, and secondly, the assessor may record information incorrectly. Factors associated with encoding, storage and retrieval of information are likely to influence the accuracy of the results reported by mystery shoppers. Apart from problems related to memory other psychological processes can exert an influence. The time of day at which the assessor visits the premises may affect the encoding accuracy due to fatigue which can affect perceptions, especially when a large number of observations are required (Guerrien *et al.* 1993).

A mystery shopper feedback evaluation reports the perceptions of an individual rather than a representative interaction and is influenced by the behaviour and appearance of both participants. The effects of individual differences between assessors can be reflected in assessments. For example, in Department Stores men tend to get priority over women (Morrison *et al.*, 1997). Also, the style of dress chosen and gender interaction can further influence service priority (Stead & Zinkhan, 1986). Women are also more likely to provide more accurate mystery shopper reports than men and the age of the assessor can affect mystery shopper reports with young adults being the most reliable (Morrison, *et al.*, 1997).

2.4 Recruitment and Training

Recruitment of the right assessor is vital as they need to be typical of the organizations' customer base or they will be easily identified as a mystery shopper. This makes selection more difficult the more complex the situation to be evaluated (Wilson, 1998b). The nature of mystery shopping requires shoppers who are 'objective, smart and able to think on their feet' (Leeds, 1992 p 25). Wilson (1998b p.155) argues that for most scenarios the adopted persona of a mystery shopper should be "neutral rather than aggressive" and recruits should be selected on the basis of having such a personality. Further research indicates mystery shoppers should be independent, critical, objective and anonymous (Hessleink & Van der Wiele 2005). Therefore the recruitment process for mystery shoppers should be robust. Intensive training should also be given so that they have a thorough understanding of their assignments (Leeds, 1992). The type of training received can also impact the reliability of the results (Wilson, 1998a). Training in data collection skills is important and shoppers should receive memory testing and training because sometimes the information collected has to be memorised until the service encounter is complete such as an interview with a bank manager concerning the opening of an account (Wilson, 1998a).

2.5 Feedback

Whatever the findings of mystery shopper exercises, employees need to be given feedback on the results in a positive manner (Burnside, 1994). Management must be informed of what value has been obtained from mystery shopping programmes (Morrell, 1994) and any changes necessary to improve customer service. Results in some organizations can be linked to bonuses, awards and prizes (Dorman, 1994). However the mystery shoppers should also receive feedback on their performance and the quality of their reports from their employing organisation

To summarise, mystery shopping has been defined as an objective method of monitoring the service as it unfolds. It is a documented, systematic process that has strengths and weaknesses associated with it.

2.6 Research method, data and analysis

A questionnaire was developed based on the issues arising from the literature and previous studies on mystery shopping. The questionnaire contained a mix of quantitative and qualitative questions. Question types included self-selection tick box, ranking and 5 point Likert scales asking participants the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements as well as a series of open questions that required more lengthy answers and explanations. The instrument was pre-tested and based on comments received some minor amendments were made to the questionnaire. Where appropriate, responses were analysed using SPSS v 20. Participants were recruited via advertising the questionnaire as a web link on UK mystery shopping message boards on the Internet. A sample of 85 mystery shoppers participated in the study consisting of 22 males and 63 females. The participants were from all regions of the UK and from a range of social backgrounds. The “professional” category included nurses, teachers, actors, accountants and managers. The “other” category consisted of mothers and housewives with caring responsibilities, child minders, carers and retired people. The respondents’ ages ranged from 21 to over 60. The mode age range was 31-40 and comprised 43.5% of the sample. The mean age was 35. There were no participants less than 21 years old in the sample studied. The length of mystery shopping experience varied. The mean length of experience was 2-3 years, with 12.9 % of sample having over 5 years experience. The most experienced respondents had at least 10 years experience.

2.7 Key Findings

2.7.1 Approach to Mystery Shopping

A qualitative analysis of the responses indicated that mystery shoppers tend to integrate their evaluation visits into their daily lives and make it part of their shopping experience. A typical day involved completion of between 1 and 10 assessments and involved meticulous planning to ensure that they understood the requirements of the scenarios. After the mystery shop was conducted notes were taken, usually in their car, and the report was submitted immediately if no further assignments were to be conducted. Other duties involved, checking emails, submitting reports, preparing for visits and answering any queries raised on assignment reports previously submitted. The preparation for visits was anything from 30 minutes to 2 hours if it involved reading briefs and making up false details.

2.7.2 Deception and Guilt

Analysis indicated that mystery shoppers did not view adopting the role of a customer as deception since staff employed by companies would normally have been made aware that mystery shoppers would assess them and this would form part of their contract of employment. They felt it was vital to capture a true account of the customer experience and staff performance and this could only be done covertly. If it were not covert then staff would behave differently. They felt they were acting on behalf of consumers generally. They argued that if staff became complacent in their work and that was not reported to Corporate Head Office then the company image would suffer. Mystery shopping was perceived as a realistic way to gain information on how a company operated.

They felt uncomfortable in giving negative feedback especially if a staff member was being helpful but not following company policy. However, overall mystery shoppers felt that theirs’ was an objective method of capturing information and was the only way to get a true reflection of customer service levels.

With regards to being challenged, 89.4% of respondents reported not being challenged by staff when conducting visits. Analysis indicated sex and age of the mystery shopper was not a significant factor for those who did report being challenged.

2.7.3 Qualities of a good mystery shopper

Respondents were asked to rank the eight qualities needed to be a good mystery customer. Table 1 below indicates their rankings.

Quality	Ranking
Ability to follow briefs	1
Ability to think on one’s feet	4

Critical	7
Anonymous	5
Independent	6
Objective	2
Smart	8
Work to deadlines	3

Table 1 Qualities of a good mystery shopper

Analysis indicated that there was a significant difference regarding the qualities required to be a good mystery shopper depending on the experience of the respondent. Those with over 3 years experience identified “Able to think on your feet” as a key quality. Sex and age did not appear to have a significant effect on qualities reported.

2.7.4 Reporting methods are their perceived effectiveness

Table 2 below shows which methods respondents used to report the results of their evaluations and their views on the effectiveness of those methods.

Reporting Method	Used	Not used	Most Effective	Least effective*
Web / Internet	84	1	60.5%	4.9%
Telephone	69	16	2.5%	22.2%
Paper	71	14	2.5%	27.2%
Video	9	76	34.5%	43.2%

Table 2 Mystery Shopper Reporting Methods

* 2.5% of respondents did not answer this question.

The above table clearly shows the popularity of the Internet for giving fast feedback on a mystery visit and it was considered to be the most effective method. Video mystery shopping is clearly still in its infancy. However of the 9 (10.5%) respondents who had used video as a reporting method 8 (88.8%) rated it as the most effective method. Analysis indicated that where a particular method was used it was rated highly as an effective reporting method. Analysis indicated that the age and sex of the assessor had no influence on the reporting method used. However, the same analysis indicated an association between the length of mystery shopping experience and the reporting method used. Those respondents with under 3 years mystery shopping experience reported a higher usage of paper based reporting methods compared to those with over 3 years experience.

2.7.5 Post evaluation issues

With regards to giving negative feedback on a mystery shop, 27.1% of respondents reported that they felt guilty whilst 72.9% said they did not. Regarding uncertainty of what to include in reports, over half of respondents (51.8%) admitted feeling unsure at times what to include. A majority (59.2%) of respondents relied on checklists to recall the information required for completing the report. When it came to reporting the visit 48.1% of respondents found the deadlines they had been given difficult to meet. However, the vast majority of mystery shoppers in this sample (82.7%) believed that their report was a true reflection of the customer experience.

The majority of mystery shoppers tended to complete their reports within 4 hours of a mystery shop having taken place. The mean time taken to complete reports was 2.16 hours – see Table 3 below.

	Time after mystery shop evaluation had taken place when report was completed				
	Less than 2 hours	2-4 hours	4-6 hours	6-8 hours	over 8 hours
Number of respondents	29	28	17	7	4

Table 3 Length of time to submit reports after mystery shop evaluation has taken place

2.7.6 Training and its perceived effectiveness

Table 4 below shows the main types of training undertaken by respondents.

Type of Training	Yes	No
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Accompanied by an experience assessor on visits and observed	6.2%	93.8%
Online web-based training	88.9%	11.1%
Paper-based manuals/briefs	79%	21%
In-house specialist training course	18.5%	81.5%
Mock mystery shop with feedback	60.5%	39.5%

Table 4. Main types of training methods

The most popular training method was web based which was an interactive training package and nearly 90% of mystery shoppers in the study had received this. The second most popular training method was paper-based manuals with nearly 80% of mystery shoppers having received this type of training. Nearly two thirds of respondents had received mock mystery shop training that involved following a brief and doing a trial shop and reporting the results to the client company. A very small number (2.5%) had received no training at all. The least used training method was that of being accompanied by an experienced assessor. Other *ad hoc* training methods included telephone conferencing or using audio-visual materials.

2.7.7 Receiving feedback

Nearly 60 % of mystery shoppers received feedback from the employing mystery shopping agency on their completed evaluation reports. The type of feedback received varied. Nearly 47 % of respondents had been praised for the excellent quality of their report, 7.1 % had corrections made to their grammar, 4.7 % had recorded information in the wrong sections of the report, 22.4 % had had the accuracy of their report challenged by the client and 5.9 % had been criticised for non compliance with the brief. Other feedback reported included the grading of submitted reports. However from the sample surveyed no one reported receiving feedback on his or her report not being submitted on time.

2.7.8 Changes in staff behavior

Nearly two-thirds of respondents (63.3%) reported changes in staff behaviour during their visit indicating that staff had been alerted to their mystery shop. Respondents noticed briefing notes/posters on staff notice boards, computers and shop windows announcing that a mystery shopper visit was due and for staff to be alert. Scores from previous visits were also prominently displayed and staff had been overheard discussing upcoming mystery shopping visits. When an enquiry was made the perception was that staff were waiting for the “trigger question”. The subsequent following of the checklist would mean that the mystery shopper was easily distinguishable from a “normal” customer. Some staff became nervous and gave too much information. Others used gestures to try and warn colleagues that they were dealing with a potential mystery shopper

3.0 Discussion

The results indicate that mystery shoppers are highly effective in measuring customer service elements as 89% of those surveyed reported not being challenged by staff whilst conducting an assessment. The age and sex of the assessor had no effect on this. However, subtle behaviours were detected in some workplaces that could have influenced staff behaviours when faced with a potential mystery shopper. This supports findings by other researchers (Marketing News, 1987) that in some cases employees are warned about forthcoming visits. This could have an adverse affect on the validity of the findings.

Leeds (1992) identified being able to ‘think on feet’ as a key quality of a mystery shopper whereas Van der Wiele *et al.* (2005) believed mystery shoppers should be anonymous, independent, critical and objective. This study ranks the contention of the former as more important.

The use of reporting methods influences how the information is recorded on the report that in turn influences how the report is scored by the mystery shopping company. The web based reporting forms proved to be highly popular and were rated as effective. However, there were several problems raised with their design including web based tick box forms where if multiple selections were made there was no space provided for comments and hence mystery shoppers were not able to describe a particular aspects of their experiences. This posed a problem where an unusual event occurred. Mystery shoppers felt this restriction on web-based forms hindered them in providing potentially valuable feedback to the client. Another problem was not having an ‘other’ option box if none of the responses available on the report form were applicable.

Despite these problems the benefits of web reporting methods were reported as numerous and included the ability to upload results quickly which allowed feedback to be given to the client and the mystery shopping company within 48 hours of the mystery shop having taken place. Suggestions for improvements to the

web-based reporting process included having the ability to upload photographs of problem areas such as faulty toilets or poor displays in outlets.

The experience of video reporting methods was rated as very effective due to the covert nature of the equipment and the ability to capture non-verbal behaviour, body language and style of communication used in comparison to other methods. The use of video placed less demand on an assessor's memory to retain and recall information over long time periods.

The difference in attitudes on effectiveness of mystery shopping was found to be highly significant in this study. 'Guilty feelings' were identified as an important attribute when giving negative feedback. This links with how assessors may be subject to subtle social pressures and may wish to give favourable reports of customer service because of empathy with people working in those establishments and hence would find it difficult to maintain objectivity. Women relied heavily on using checklists to recall information and men were unsure at times what to include in the report. These findings partially support the contention of Morrison *et al.* (1997) in that women provide more accurate feedback due to their use of memory testing techniques. Men, in comparison, appear uncertain of exactly what to include in reports and so are at greater risk of the report being challenged by the mystery-shopping client if it was deemed not to be a fair reflection of customer experiences (as perceived by the employee if omissions and errors were identified).

The most popular training received was web based due to accessibility and convenience. The web-based assessments had to be completed successfully before the mystery shopper was allowed to conduct "real" evaluations. There were variations in the type of training received, some respondents receiving none or were simply given a manual to read. Others felt that the 'ability to think and act quickly' was more important than training. The recommendations for improving training included clearer briefing notes, realistic in-depth scenarios and being able to examine samples of correctly completed evaluation reports. Other recommendations included having to work for a trial period where all assessments were monitored and checked for report quality. From the sample surveyed those who had accompanied an experienced assessor as part of their training rated this method as highly effective as it gave a more accurate assessment of a candidate's suitability. Respondents identified preparing for visits, completion of reports and common errors as important elements of their training and these factors should be incorporated into all training programmes.

4.0 Conclusions

This paper has identified both good and bad practices in the recruitment, training and use of mystery shoppers. Clearly bad practice needs to be eliminated. Responsibility for this is with the mystery shopper employment agencies. The findings indicated that there are varying approaches to the visits and the method of reporting back. There appears to be no feelings of guilt or deception, although some discomfort can be felt when reporting on negative behaviours. The type of training offered also varied. Agencies need to follow some straightforward guidelines regarding recruitment and use of mystery shoppers, including:

- Recruit the right people and match people profile with the client brief;
- Train recruits in all areas of the job including different monitoring techniques memory and observational skills, interviewing skills, avoiding detection, understanding assignments briefs, the use of checklists and completing and submitting reports;
- Give all mystery shoppers periodic performance appraisals;
- Ensure that client assignment briefs are robust and will not lead to the easy identification of the mystery customer. Be prepared to refuse to take on a client if the briefs are of poor quality.

Overall, the findings from this study concur with the literature that the use of mystery customers, as a covert method of measuring performance, appears useful and effective. However, there are many companies, particularly via the Internet, offering mystery shopping services and they are not as selective when it comes to recruitment and offer no training to new recruits, despite Leeds (1992) suggestions that training should be intensive. Client briefs are delivered via e-mail and reports are submitted online. This research suggests that the validity and reliability of data so gathered may be questionable.

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