

The secret service

Businesses can test their employees' knowledge, customer service skills and productivity by using a mystery shopper to gather constructive information discreetly and professionally. *Graham Morphy-Morris* looks at how to get the most out of this type of service

Mystery shopping is a form of public observation. It can be used by any company that delivers products and services to the consumer, to test employee knowledge, customer service skills and productivity during the day-to-day running of the business.

The main aim of mystery shopping is to provide operational feedback to identify whether processes are performing as they should and to motivate staff by linking employee performance with reward. Companies can also use feedback to benchmark against comparable services offered by competitors, although this needs to be done carefully as it can be problematic if it borders on industrial espionage.

WHAT DO THEY DO?

Mystery shopping arrived in the 1940s as a way to measure employee performance and general service or product delivery. Tools used to measure employee integrity range from questionnaires and written reports to video analysis.

A growing number of companies providing vital customer-facing services use some form of mystery shopping. The list is extensive but includes hotels, serviced apartments, guest accommodation, supermarkets, fast-food chains, health clubs and restaurants. The tourism industry in particular uses mystery shopper services extensively.

Posing as a normal customer, a mystery shopper performs specific tasks that are usually prearranged but carried out secretly. Staff members remain oblivious to who they are and what their true objectives are.

Transactions may include making a hotel reservation, experiencing dinner or wine service, asking questions at reception, making a complaint



Mystery shopping can be a sensitive issue with staff, who may feel threatened by the idea of being "spied" on, so it is important that

or buying a product over the counter. During this time, they gather constructive information discreetly and professionally.

The mystery shopper will then review and analyse the key information and data they have collected, and produce a detailed report showing the outcome of their experiences measured against previously defined criteria. It is likely they will use a percentage scoring structure to evaluate performance and to

compare against previous assessments. The mystery shopper will usually announce who they are shortly after the service has been tested.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

It is what companies do with the information from the mystery shopper report that matters most. Taking the facts and figures from their feedback and implementing management change, employee improvement

programmes or training is essential in making the mystery shopper service a worthwhile management and marketing tool. Also, members of staff are more motivated under a watchful eye than when left on their own.

Recently, mystery shopping service providers have extended to not only providing detailed feedback on their experience but providing solutions for particular service areas that do