



REX FEATURES

the assessors are professional and experienced

not comply with company standards.

Training and mentoring services are also available in order not only to identify an issue but rectify it as well. Mystery shopping companies that can provide this 360-degree analysis are likely to be the most beneficial to use.

#### WHY USE A MYSTERY SHOPPER?

Companies that use mystery shoppers as a means to improve

### CASE STUDY: MYSTERY SHOPPING AT A FOUR-STAR HOTEL

I recently stayed overnight (as a mystery shopper) in a well-known city-centre, four-star hotel with a reputation for good service.

I phoned the main hotel switchboard to make a reservation, and was promptly transferred to the reservations department, where they took my name, address and credit card details.

They didn't offer a dinner

reservation or discuss the type of rooms available. Neither did they ask how many people would be staying or whether I would require car parking facilities or directions to the hotel. To cap it all, they didn't send me any confirmation letter or e-mail in advance of my arrival.

The next morning, as part of the mystery shopper feedback, I presented the hotel's general

manager with constructive feedback, including a review of operational issues at booking stage.

The conscientious general manager did not waste time and implemented change immediately. In doing this he has avoided potential loss of business and preserved the good reputation of the hotel.

services undoubtedly see profit margins improve as well.

When operating and running a business, your focus and attention can vary on a day-to-day, hour-by-hour basis. You cannot physically see what is happening in every area, particularly the all-important customer-facing operation or point of contact. Staff performance is not consistent and requires regular assessment. Obviously, future business depends on staff delivery and performance, and you need to know the facts, not just general perceptions.

It is a major advantage if a business can ensure consistency of service delivery against competition. It can bring immediate service improvements, and continuous development is possible if used on an ongoing basis. You are always going to be one step ahead armed with actual "live" performance data.

#### WHO DOES IT?

So who undertakes mystery shopping and how do you go about getting a reputable company to undertake the analysis for you?

Because this can be a sensitive issue with staff – who may feel threatened by the idea of mystery shoppers "spying" on them, it is important that the assessors are professional and experienced so

the feedback can be used as part of an ongoing training and mentoring process.

First, I recommend seeking advice from the Tourism Society. It knows the industry and complies with a strict code of conduct. It has a network of consultants who provide this type of service, covering all

### FINDING A SUPPLIER

The Mystery Dining Company has joined forces with the National Skills Academy for Hospitality to help evaluate customer service across the sector in England.

The partnership has seen the creation of a set of national benchmarking criteria, which will provide a quarterly report on customer-operator interactions and rank performance by sub-sector and region.

Through a series of visits to sites ranging from café operations to Michelin-starred establishments and hotels, the assessors will evaluate and report on a range of criteria that have been designed to capture the impact on customers for crucial aspects of the dining and hospitality experience.

The Mystery Dining Company has more than 2,500 qualified mystery diners who undertake an average of 1,000 mystery visits per month.

→ [www.mysterydining.co.uk](http://www.mysterydining.co.uk)

→ [www.excellencefound.co.uk](http://www.excellencefound.co.uk)

major categories within their specialist areas.

Other reputable organisations include VisitEngland/Scotland/Wales, Quality in Tourism, the AA or Livetourism (see panel for more details).

#### SEEK PROFESSIONAL ADVICE

A word of warning: there are many businesses or single people offering mystery shopping services. Be very careful who you choose and seek professional advice before parting with any money.

Use people with relevant industry experience and not just a friend or someone who says they know your industry. Also, companies that offer cheaper prices are not necessarily going to provide the service you want. Make sure you ask for references or testimonials of previous mystery shopping work undertaken.

Companies who use credible mystery shoppers to provide facts on performance to improve, motivate and train staff for the better will always benefit from this service.

● *Graham Morphy-Morris is the former North-west area manager for VisitBritain's assessment arm, Quality in Tourism. He is currently director of the Hospitality Consulting Service.*

→ [www.hospitalityconsulting-service.co.uk](http://www.hospitalityconsulting-service.co.uk)