



TAKE A GOOD LOOK

With the influx of visitors expected for the Rugby World Cup, there has never been a better time to take a good hard look at what you offer your customers – and it's not just the in-store service that needs to come under scrutiny.



Every aspect of the customer experience should be assessed from your website, through to the store itself and beyond to your after-sales service. Enlisting the help of a professional mystery shopping company is undoubtedly the most effective way to do this and, if you've never used mystery shopping before, chances are you'll be surprised and impressed with what the new age of mystery shopping can offer your business.

Mystery shopping is now more than simply a compliance check of the sales staff or making sure the floor is clean. It has, according to Richard Potton, director of Hoed NZ Ltd. evolved into what he refers to as entry-level market research – and for such a valuable business tool it comes at a very affordable price at that. The focus, he says, has shifted from one of watchdog to a strong emphasis on making improvements with the broad spectrum of service now being assessed.

Chris Jones of Market Pulse echoes this sentiment, saying that the 'vanilla' approach is no longer taken with mystery shopping. Programmes nowadays, he says, are specifically customised for each business so that they match the customer's entire journey through the service

experience. And, by service, he is talking about more than just the greeting and how well a product is promoted. Service, he says, can mean something as varied as the availability of a product or even the quality of that product.

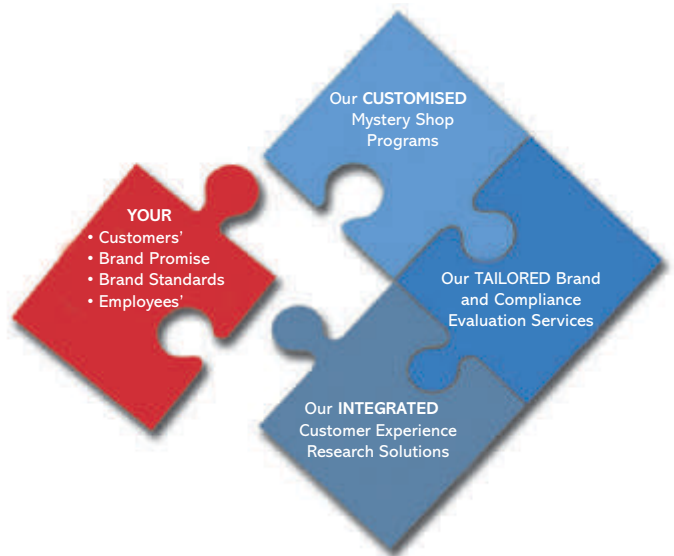
Website

A service component that has more recently come under the radar of the mystery shopper is that of the website. Switched-on retailers know that, very often, customers will have checked out their website before visiting their store, so it makes sense to mystery-shop the website as well. Potton says that, typically, when mystery shopping a website, they will look at factors such as how quickly it is for the site to load, how easy it is to navigate (with the number of clicks from one point to another being recorded) and the response time for a customer enquiry. The mystery-shop is thorough and is taken right through to the purchase stage to simulate a real customer.

Helen Frost of Customer Care Ltd. also reports that the practice of mystery shopping websites is now more widespread – citing restaurants as high users of this service as it allows them to test the effectiveness of their site in relation to menus,

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opening hours, address details, etc. And, with increased competition for the entertainment dollar brought about by tough economic times, this looks set to continue. Frost says others who are also embracing mystery shopping for the same reason include wineries, transport providers, tourism ventures and hire companies.

Typically, says Jones, a full mystery-shop for their clients would include an enquiry through the website, followed by a phone call and then a store visit – which might also involve a repeat visit to return the item purchased so that the store’s refund policy can be tested. Not all of this is necessary, he says, if the client deems that only parts of the experience need to be assessed.

Outside

Exit interviews are also being used more often to capture information from customers directly following their shopping experience in-store. An exit interview involves asking the customer a series of open-ended questions. The responses are then compared with the feedback from the mystery shoppers to determine whether what actually happened is what the customer wanted to



happen. If not, changes need to be made – and quickly – as business performance, Jones says, translates directly to dollars and for the business owner it’s about return on investment.

It’s not all about the interaction that takes place between the customer and salesperson, though – whether it be on-line, over the phone or in person. Indeed, some mystery shoppers are being asked, instead, to conduct overt assessments whereby they look for adherence to certain standards – whether it be the presentation of a product, the display of signage or easy-to-read pricing. These mystery shoppers, Jones says, might even have a conversation with the store manager and take photos of what they observe to accompany their report.

As the range of services offered by mystery shopping companies has increased so, too, has their use of technology to drive the process. This allows them to provide the sort of service demanded by retailers, big

The results, too, are made available on-line with clients using a password to access a secure place on the site. So eager for the information are they that, sometimes – according to Trevor Harrowfield of the Mystery

Business performance translates directly to dollars so it’s vital that you check and re-check every aspect of your business that your customers can access – and make sure it’s a smooth and pleasant journey.

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and small, who now more than ever need this information to remain competitive. On-line reporting systems mean that mystery shoppers can be assigned to jobs, reports completed, and filed with ease – often within very tight timeframes.

Shop Network – the feedback gets passed on within 24 hours. Responsiveness, he says, is the key to making the most of your mystery shopping programme; get the feedback and put it into practice straightaway.

Competitors

Competition, Trevor says, is also responsible for the rise in retailers wanting their competitors mystery-shopped. And, not only are these shoppers being asked to look at pricing, the whole offer seems to be coming under the spotlight with clients wanting to know what their competitors are doing better than them. Pricing, after all, might be effective in driving customers to the door, but it's the experience in the store that is seen to be crucial for increasing sales and building loyalty.

Amber O'Neill of Fieldforce Ltd. agrees. She considers customer service standards are falling as retailers focus on price rather than on service – but lower prices, she believes, cannot be sustained.

“There is a need to build customer loyalty and nothing does that more than good customer service,” she says.

Training the key

When it comes to the success of mystery shopping programmes, there is overwhelming agreement that training is the key to making the most of your mystery shopping. The mystery shopping, Potton says, needs to dovetail with training because there is no good in getting the results and then not doing anything with them; there needs to be action. O'Neill subscribes to the same philosophy, saying “It is not enough any more for a salesperson to have a perky personality, they also need to be able to listen, engage, meet needs and sell; and, for this to be achieved, there needs to be thorough training.”

It seems, too, that these companies practise what they preach by fully training their mystery shoppers so they know exactly what to look for and what they need to report on. The mystery shoppers are also encouraged to share their thoughts and feelings. The value of this should not be underestimated, says Potton. “It's the nuggets or gems of information that you get from



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the mystery shoppers – within their responses – that can be the most valuable.”

Frequency

Far from being something you do on the odd occasion, mystery shopping has far greater value if carried out regularly. Potton estimates that up to 85 per cent of their clients have mystery-shops done on a monthly basis. Others follow a bi-monthly plan and a few have quarterly assessments carried out.

And, he says, mystery shopping is beneficial, even in the hard times, so don't be tempted to ease off now. “Those who continue to look at service delivery and keep tweaking it, will be the ones who are in the market long-term.” ■

□ By Sarah Webb, a retail writer and regular contributor to NZRetail.

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