

Mystery shopping trend on the rise

Photos by Joshua McKerrow -- The Capital

The concept of mystery shopping has been around for decades, but more businesses such as Admiral Cleaners are shelling out money for clandestine patrons to monitor everything from merchandising and product quality to store cleanliness, advocates said.

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It was 3 o'clock on a recent cold afternoon when the "mystery shopper" secretly entered Admiral Cleaners in Edgewater.

She was there on a simple mission: Drop off a black sweater and rate the customer service - anonymously.

Admiral Cleaners employees, you can relax. You did just fine.

The shopper said your windows were clean and there were no spills or food on the counter. OK, so there was some trash blowing around outside the store, but overall the exterior looked good. As for the customer greeting? Someone said hello as soon as she walked in the door.

The concept of mystery shopping has been around for decades, but more businesses such as Admiral Cleaners are shelling out money for clandestine patrons to monitor everything from merchandising and product quality to store cleanliness, advocates said.

John Swinburn, executive director of the Mystery Shopping Providers Association in Dallas, said the industry has grown "radically" within the past decade thanks in part to visibility from the Internet.

"People recognize that in order to be competitive in the marketplace, they have to understand what their customers are experiencing," he said.

The association estimates the U.S. mystery shopping industry is valued at \$800 million. However, Mr. Swinburn said that figure is conservative, adding that a 2005 study found that the industry is growing between 11 percent and 12 percent a year.

Mystery shopping attained its moniker for the obvious reasons: Anonymous third-party evaluators work as independent contractors, checking out customer service for everything from restaurants and retailers to banks and airports. A secret identity is so important to a mystery shopper that *The Capital* agreed to keep a local shopper's face and name under wraps.

For those looking for some extra cash, the pay isn't bad, either. It varies from company to company, but Customer Service Experts in Annapolis shell out between \$10 for an evaluation of a quick-service restaurant all the way up to \$125 for more time-consuming assignments such as visiting a ski resort or spa, said Lise D'Andrea, president and chief executive officer of the national mystery shopping company on Riva Trace Parkway that mystery shops at 42 locations throughout Anne Arundel County.

Ms. D'Andrea, who also sits on the association board of directors and serves on the organization's programs committee, said she has 23,208 active shoppers, monitoring everything from the National Zoo in Washington to the airport concession program at BWI Thurgood Marshall Airport.

Whitney Kerridge, who runs Admiral Cleaners with her husband Scott, said her company has had a mystery shopping program in place for more than 20 years, but Customer Service Experts is "by far the best." Customer Service Experts provides Admiral Cleaners with two mystery shoppers a month, has developed training programs and customer service standards, and even helped Admiral develop a mystery shopping form that is shared with employees when they are hired.

"It's a powerful management tool and the information provided, really, it's invaluable," Ms. Kerridge said.

Ms. D'Andrea said one misconception about the industry is that it's all about catching someone doing something wrong. In reality, it's about measuring how well a company delivers customer service, she said.

"It's to recognize great performance and to improve subpar performance," she said.

Mystery shoppers are screened before receiving their stealthy status. At Customer Service Experts, you have to pass a writing test and prove an ability to document a customer service experience, pinpointing the positive as well as areas for improvement, Ms. D'Andrea said. Qualified shoppers receive e-mail for assignments in their geographical area. And once an assignment is given, shoppers are tested again to make sure they understand what to evaluate in a narrative edited by the company's staff.

Some companies, Ms. D'Andrea said, are looking for specific standards they've trained their staff on. Others want to monitor compliance issues, such as whether a location has the right signage or neat and orderly landscaping. The need is fueling business for Customer Service Experts, which has seen double-digit revenue growth since 1995, she said.

Ms. D'Andrea attributes the demand for her company to its "employee-centric" model that ties mystery shopping data in with consulting and training services. Customer Service Experts diagnoses a company "as a sort of a service doctor," analyzes what procedures need to be adjusted and designs customized training programs to help a firm realize results, she said.

Business owners typically come to her from different "entry points." Some are just starting up a business and want to learn how to deliver great service and others have been in business for a while and want to "rework their systems," she said.

Meanwhile, mystery shoppers have the opportunity to make a few extra bucks and gain some interesting experiences.

The mystery shopper interviewed for this story works for Customer Service Experts. She said she also shops for between 20 and 30 other mystery shopping companies and takes in about \$1,000 and \$2,000 a year. The shopping jobs allow her to contribute to a company's improvement, she said.

"The customer service has changed by the time I go back," she said. "It made a difference."

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