

## Shop Floor Spies

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Doha • The person pushing a shopping cart at the local supermarket or checking out clothes at an upmarket boutique may not be what they seem to be i.e. regular shoppers.

These people could well be mystery shoppers, a concept that uses trained shoppers to anonymously evaluate customer service. The concept is being brought to the country for the first time by the Grass Roots Group, a major provider of mystery shopping services internationally.

With the country in the midst of a major upswing in retailing, customer service often falls by the wayside. Mark Spicer, Grass Roots' General Manager said: "Whilst customer service in Qatar has previously been of a high standard, this is in danger of falling as staff struggle to cope with the pressure from rapid development, the economic boom and the growth in population."

Grass Roots is lining up a mystery shopping panel which will target retailers, restaurants, hotels and the financial and automotive sectors. A spokesperson said one client has already signed on, declining to give the name.

Mystery shoppers allow clients to assess services and that of their competitors. A mystery shopper anonymously purchases goods or has a meal in a restaurant for example, then notes down comments and the experience at the outlet which is then passed on to a firm like Grass Roots.

"Mystery shopping provides an accurate picture of the customer experience, using real people in real situations to report their experience. We are inviting people of all backgrounds of Qatar's demographic characteristics to join our panel," said Spicer.

Those who sign on will be paid just to shop and give their feedback. In the case of restaurants, the general practice is to refund the amount paid on the meal.

Spicer said: "In customer service, bad news travels fast. One unhappy customer will tell five other people of their bad experience with service.

However, our mystery shopping programme is not about spying on bad employees but is more focused on improving customer experience.”

Grass Roots carries out three types of mystery shopping - in person, by telephone or the Internet. In each case, the shopper completes a questionnaire which they can enter on the website.

This is Grass Roots' first year in the Middle East. It provides performance improvement services to over 2,000 clients in North America, Europe and Latin America. It has a global panel of over 100,000 mystery shoppers.

Research has shown one in four customers is unwilling to repeat or recommend a visit to an outlet where they have received shoddy service.

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