

[The Devil Inside] Mystery Shopping Anomalies

Many people across the world, especially native English speakers use the expression, “the devil inside” to describe the shady part of their souls. The part that most people are not proud of, in fact many people tend to deny its existence within them. Denial is surely an unwise approach, since the world is ying-yang, good-bad, black-white. Without one, we couldn’t appreciate the other, hence the expression “necessary evil”. This is true for our professional life as well. Everyone needs a taste of bad to appreciate the good. Then at the end of the day we realize that mistakes help us learn, and improve. Mystery Shopping also faces certain challenges, which need to be overcome to realize a successful project, or customer care program. In cooperation with Judith Rappold – President of the International Association of Service Evaluators (IASE), Phantom Shopping® has identified four anomaly types that characterize the Central Eastern European market. Such Mystery Shopping anomalies are called shopper spotting, empathy factor, de-motivating shopping, and unjustified shops. The below columns provide full insight.

[shopper spotting]

Shopper spotting refers to the event when the tested employees identify the mystery shopper. It is most likely to happen where Mystery Shopping happens at regular basis. Frontline employees will aim to spot the shoppers, therefore proper preparation is vital. Using inappropriately trained or untrained shoppers endangers the very nature of the service. It loses its relevance towards quality assurance (controlling). If employees can spot most mystery shoppers, it becomes easy for them to slack with average customers and still have good reported performance. Shopper spotting also undermines the motivation and incentive program efforts. It is easy for employees to perform great on mystery shops if they can manage to identify the mystery shopper. The client organization in this case will get great feedback from the shopper company, meaning that seemingly everything is alright. However, the overall goal of the mystery shopping function, namely the improvement of customer service, and enhancement of customer loyalty will not be met.

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[empathy factor]

Empathy factor strikes when mystery shoppers have an emotional approach to the given assignment. If a shopper and the employees of the tested business unit are affiliated, emotional bias may distort objective observation. Empathy factor therefore endangers the objectivity of the mystery shopping survey, hence it is to be avoided. Exclusion of empathy factor requires thorough background check of potential shoppers during the selection phase of the project. It is highly common to exclude relatives, friends, or any affiliation between the tested business unit’s employees and the mystery shopper.

[de-motivating shopping]

It is highly recommended to use Mystery Shopping at a regular basis rather than as one-off projects, when the goal is to enhance service quality and customer satisfaction. This is good on one hand and risky on the other. It generates feedback on employee performance, which is crucial for managerial decision making. Then again the results usually end up at the observed person, along with management's comments. In Central Eastern Europe many employees reported dislike of the mystery shopping function, due to the disciplinary reaction of management. This managerial approach is a backfire to what Mystery Shopping stands for. It triggers dissatisfaction, de-motivation and even frustration of frontline employees. As many times in life, the good solution lies right next to the bad one. In case managers put greater emphasis on appraising high performers, the whole team of employees will be encouraged to do their best. What's more, using prizes and other incentives will make the rest of the team want to get out there and show what they are capable of.

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[unjustified shops]

It may sound awkward or even outrageous, but it's true. Central Eastern Europe has seen cases in which the Mystery Shopping company did not actually do 100 percent of the field work. This questions the validity of the survey results and the study in general. Obviously, performing shops at all the business units within the sample is the way to go. The previous example has led to clients being skeptical about Mystery Shopping companies – no wonder. To eliminate such feelings, it is important for shopping companies to provide proof for the shopper visits. This can be done in various forms, with tolerable extra effort. In fact it will give the client a comfortable feeling of "they have nothing to hide". This lesson shows that hiring a shopping company that does not offer ways to justify their fieldwork is probably not very wise on the client's side. To go one step further, this can be an option for clients to screen potential candidates for a given job.

All in all, the necessary evil is something to be aware of. It may strike whether we want it to or not. We are human beings and we make mistakes in our professional life as well as in our leisure time, regardless of how good our intentions are. Mistakes identified in Mystery Shopping help all professional organizations improve, and those who do, usually end up as winners of the competition.

Zoltan Herczeg
Phantom Shopping®
www.phantomshopping.com

Dedicated member of the IASE