

Mystery shoppers put customer service to the test

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A few years ago, Melanie Jordan decided to make some extra income. A self-employed full-time mortgage broker, Jordan worked on straight

commission, which at times left her short of money.

Jordan, a New York City native who now lives in South Orange County, Calif., searched the Web and found a site called "Mystery Shoppers Resources."

Mystery shoppers are people

who get paid to visit businesses, pretending to be customers, and observe the level of service they receive. The shopper then reports this information back to the company that hired them.

"My first assignment came from aiding a desperate scheduler who

was stuck because another shopper had canceled out on her," Jordan says. "It was my foot in the door."

Since that first assignment, Jordan has become a seasoned mystery shopper, and has even

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written two books on the subject, one for beginners wanting to know about the job, and another on refining one's techniques for maximum earning.

"I tell potential mystery shoppers that this work can be used in a lot of ways," she says. "For me, I am using it as a means to an end."

"Mystery shoppers are the objective eyes and ears of business owners or management," Jordan says. "They can provide valuable feedback that can be used in many ways, including customer service, identifying sales training needs, ensuring federal or state regulations are being met, and tying into employee-performance evaluations."

Shopping in droves

It's almost impossible to maintain a current number of mystery shoppers in the United States, says John Swinburn, the executive director of Mystery Shopping Providers Association (MSPA). The MSPA is a Dallas-based association of companies who specialize in mystery shopping and market research. "One company might have 50,000 mystery shoppers in its database, while another has 100,000," he says. "There is no way to know the duplicates."

Certified Reports, Inc. is one upstate New York company that businesses contact in order to hire mystery shoppers. Though located in Kinderhook, the company has 30 clients nationwide and draws on its pool of 15,000 mystery shoppers, says Kara Smith, director of sales and marketing.

"Mystery shoppers give them an idea of how their restaurant or store is really functioning," Smith says.

Businesses use mystery shoppers to measure a variety of things. In fast-food establishments, mystery shoppers observe the friendliness of staff, quality of the food, cleanliness of the building, and also the speed of their service. In retail and manufacturing companies, clients hire shoppers to identify the salesperson's knowledge of a brand or model, says Laura Livers, president of Shop 'n Chek, an Atlanta-based mystery shopping company.

"It's hard for people, speaking from a corporate standpoint, to know what's happening at the front line," Livers says. "The people with the most interactions are the least-paid employees, but they

make a difference."

While many businesses in Central New York and around the country use mystery shoppers, many declined to comment based on the anonymity issue and corporate policy.

Rob Glisson, manager of Waldenbooks at Shoppingtown Mall in DeWitt, did say that using mystery shoppers improves business.

"It tends to keep employees on their toes," Glisson says. "They keep up standards."

Most mystery shoppers are independent contractors, which means they are their own bosses and can pick and choose their assignments.

"That's one of the great benefits of being a mystery shopper," Jordan says. "It never gets boring because no two days are alike. In the morning I might be doing an apartment shop, then take myself out to lunch with a fast-food or restaurant shop, and then that afternoon drive over to two car dealers to test drive any car I want."

While the mystery shoppers themselves can make money with this job, it is the businesses that profit the most.

The inside scoop

"It's amazing what mystery shoppers find out," Livers says. "With one company, a lot of [mystery shoppers] couldn't find anyone to assist them, since they were all stocking the shelves. The company changed their policy to stock the shelves at a non-business hour."

Another case involved shoppers saying it was hard to find a parking spot at one store, and it was due to delivery trucks that were supposed to be there during off-hours. "The company had no idea there were delivery problems," Livers says.

Livers says most businesses can benefit from mystery shoppers. "All businesses that rely on customers to shop for their survival should use them," she says. "A blue shirt is a blue shirt anywhere. It's the level of customer service that makes a difference."

For a company to be a leader in a heavily-competitive business world, it needs employees who provide excellent customer service, Jordan says.

"The goal is to create 'raving fans,'" Jordan says. "Mystery shoppers can help fine-tune a business until it reaches this level, and then help ensure it stays there."

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