

Always Sweet Mystery of Shopping

A dream job for shopaholics?

By Patricia Morlatke Roden | Staff Writer

Imagine getting paid to spend someone else's money. It's true. There are thousands of companies willing to pay you to dine at fine restaurants, sip a margarita by a resort swimming pool, even take a cruise.

The lucky people getting these perks are mystery shoppers.

Businesses in just about every retail sector use these undercover shoppers to anonymously evaluate customer service, employee integrity and product quality.

Some of the best make up to \$40,000 a year, but most get paid far less.

"You're not going to get rich. It's a lot of hard work. It's not for the faint of heart," says Shannon Andrews of Redlands, who gets 20 to 30 assignments monthly. "But, it's fun and a great second income."

Mystery shopping has become a \$1 billion industry worldwide, according to the Mystery Shopping Providers Association, an organization that recruits mystery shoppers on the Internet.

As the demand grows, so does the caliber of people working in the field.

"There are more professional shoppers than in the beginning," says Jan Deusch, whose Rancho Cucamonga-based California Marketing Specialists has a database of about 3,500 mystery shoppers. "There are more professional shoppers than there were



in the beginning."

The demand for shoppers is growing.

"Absolutely. It's a competitive world out there, and businesses of all types and sizes need objective mystery shoppers to be their eyes and ears in the field," says Melanie Jordan, an Orange County author of how-to books who has finely honed skills of the trade.

"Companies who want to survive and thrive need to do ongoing research into their customers' experiences to ensure a positive business relationship, discover missed sales opportunities, and to gain an edge over competitors."

These days, Deusch and companies like hers can pick and choose among the most

JOB REQUIREMENTS

Dr. Ilisha Newhouse, author of "Mystery Shopping Made Simple" (McGraw-Hill, \$14.99), says there are three characteristics of a good

shopper:

- You must love to shop. If you don't like shopping, asking questions, or interacting with other people, this job is not for you.
- You must be able to recall details such as the sales associate's name, events that occurred during the shopping experience, and the condition of the facility.
- You must love paperwork and have exceptional writing and communication skills. It can vary from a quick and simple questionnaire to a 500-page narrative.

Small illustration by BETTIE GAYNE

ON THE WEB

Numerous internet sites offer free information about mystery shopping opportunities. Among them: **Mystery Shopping Providers Association**, www.mysteryshop.org; **National Center for Professional Mystery Shoppers**, www.mysteryshop.org; **Melanie Jordan**, author and coach, www.mysteryshoppercoach.com

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Shop

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experienced and dependable mystery shoppers for jobs that typically pay \$20 to \$30. Her firm specializes in the apartment and hotel industries.

"We send people out to take a tour of apartment communities as a prospective renter. They set up an appointment and evaluate customer service and sales ability, how the client is treated, whether they are sold on service and enticed into renting an apartment," Deutsch says. The client then receives a written report, evaluating the employee's performance. Usually that is done via the Internet.

How much shoppers can earn varies.

"Shoppers can make \$40,000," Deutsch says. "That's rare, but it does happen."

Most "shops" — the industry lingo for undercover shopping — pay a specific fee and reimbursement for money spent. But don't think you can buy expensive audio equipment and keep it. The business doesn't work that way.

"Shoppers are usually told they have to purchase something and then return it," Deutsch says. That doesn't apply to people evaluating restaurants. "It's great for people who like to eat out."

Shoppers are recruited through advertising or referrals. Sometimes they are asked to complete a profile so they can be matched to assignments. The training they receive depends on the company that hires them.

Jordan, whose books include "The Perfect Work-at-Home Job: Mystery Shopping" and "How to Finally Make Money as a Mystery Shopper" (available on line at www.mysteryshoppercoach.com), encourages people to treat mystery shopping as a serious endeavor.

"Mystery shopping is actually one form of marketing research; it's important work," she says. "The mystery shopper acts like a professional, is treated like one. That mystery shopper will also be the one who ultimately gets the regular, better-paying work in the field that eludes so many wannabes."

The professional aspect has been the focus of some of the organizations devoted to mystery shopping, such as the National Center for Professional Mystery Shoppers.

"I know that group's heart is in the right place in attempting to try and create some standards and certification for mystery shoppers. Mystery shoppers should understand that while such a course can't hurt them, it is not a requirement," Jordan says. "I've never been certified.

Nor do I intend to be. And I've done just fine."

On the other hand, about 12,000 shoppers, including Shannon Andrews, are certified through the Mystery Shopping Providers Association. Shoppers are trained on-line and in workshops presented by the organization.

Prospective shoppers should never pay for job tips. Internet sites abound, offering tips, resources, and shopping opportunities. Although a few require a membership fee to register, most are free.

"A lot of people answer ads that promise if you send in money they will send you a publication that will turn you onto wonderful companies, and promise you will make a couple hundred dollars a day. Basically, what you are getting is information that could be obtained free on a Web site," Deutsch says.

Andrews, for example, operates a free Web site that provides information on training and working as a mystery shopper, along with links to companies that are hiring.

Numerous books also are available, including Dr. Ilisha Newhouse's latest publication, "Mystery Shopping Made Simple" (McGraw-Hill, \$14.99). Newhouse tells readers how to connect with mystery shopping companies, establish their own businesses and how to fill out evaluation forms.

Recently a few clicks of the mouse turned up companies seeking undercover shoppers for fast food restaurants in Barstow, Chino and Corona, a bank in Ontario, transportation company in San Bernardino, loan office in Banning, gas station in Big Bear Lake, and convenience store in Yucaipa. Most offered a flat fee pay ranging from \$7 to \$20, although the evaluation for loan services offered \$125 in compensation.

Depending on the company, you may be required to try to buy alcohol or tobacco products without proof of age, rent a video and keep it until it is overdue, have your vehicle washed and report on the integrity of employees, eat a meal in a restaurant, or buy a bus ticket.

Jordan's tip for prospective shoppers is simple: "First, don't waste time applying to any and every mystery shopping company you can find, unless you want to be an underemployed shopper with very sore fingers. For a job search in the regular business world, the shot gun approach of applying en masse to companies when you don't even know if there are job openings, rarely works. It's the same thing with mystery shopping. Just like any other freelancers, mystery shoppers need to learn to generate work for themselves on a regular basis. This is effectively done through networking and

marketing of their services through the various job lead boards on Yahoo and Topica, and the middlemen and women of the industry known as schedulers.

"Second," she says, "do a great job when you are given an assignment, so you'll get asked to do another one. Eventually you'll become a go-to person for many companies and schedulers, and then you'll likely be in the enviable position of having more work than you can handle."

Although most consumers aren't aware of mystery shoppers, major retailers often use them to check the quality of the service and products they are providing. Sometimes the shop-

pers reveal themselves and reward efficient and courteous employees on the spot, with incentives provided by the employer.

"It is very motivating for the employee," Deutsch says. "They have everything to gain from that."

Andrews — by day an administrative assistant for CHS Inc. in Colton — will never forget one shopping assignment, to evaluate a sales member for a cellular telephone company.

Her job was to convince the salesperson she wanted to buy a cell phone, but didn't know anything about the technology.

She nearly lost her cover when her own cell phone rang in the middle of the sales pitch.

"Sometimes you really have to think on your toes," she says.

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