



## DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION OF A POWERFUL SHOPPER PROGRAM

There are nearly as many varieties of mystery shopper programs as there are companies. But many are not used as effectively as they could be. Yes, feedback is always great to have, but the key is what you do with it.

A mystery shopper program evaluates the quality of customer satisfaction at the front line level. "Secret" customers (shoppers) visit or call your business and pose as a normal customer, doing the same things that real customers do. The difference? Mystery shoppers pay more attention and observe from an objective viewpoint. They remember what happens and once they return home, complete a detailed questionnaire to measure their overall customer experience.

What is the point? If your staff thinks that any customer, any time, could be a shopper, they will be more attentive and focused on *all customers*. That equates to improved customer satisfaction!

A powerful mystery shopper program will:

- Measure the customer experience in your locations
- Provide quantifiable data on customer service skills of your staff
- Reinforce staff behaviors that will improve customer loyalty and sales
- Keep your staff's eye on the ball of exceptional customer service

Why should you care about these things? Today's consumer has more power than ever. With social media, they can affect your company's reputation - and therefore your bottom line - overnight. It costs you 6-7 times more to gain a new customer than it does to keep a current customer happy. 70% of customers are willing to pay up to 25% more for a better customer experience.

Simply put, if you wish to rise above the competition and succeed in today's marketplace, you *must provide excellent customer service*.

What about customer satisfaction surveys, don't they do the same thing? Not at all. A survey of real customers provides insight on how customers "feel" or how they "think" about your service quality. This is just as important as a mystery shop report, but completely different. It is emotionally based. A mystery shopper report pinpoints *specific* behaviors that contribute to service quality so you have data on where improvements are needed.

Think of them as "left brain, right brain". One is emotional, one is practical. You need to do both to truly gauge service quality. If real customers mark you low on a particular area, the mystery shopper report can show you what skills need to



improve to raise that score. Survey and Shopper Reports complement each other but provide feedback on different levels.

Let's review the crucial steps in setting up your mystery shop program:

1. Define Customer Service Standards
2. Obtain Management Buy-In
3. Team Up with an Experienced Shop Provider
4. Design an Effective Questionnaire
5. Set a Baseline
6. Use Results to Improve Performance

Before you start your mystery shop program, at least think through these steps in order to insure that it best serves your needs. An experienced Shop Provider can assist you with all of these steps but they will need some input from you and your team. And the more input you give your provider, the better your program will serve you and your goals.

### **DEFINE CUSTOMER SERVICE STANDARDS**

Think about your staff and current performance: Do you have any measurement at all right now? What are your customers saying about you? What have you observed when visiting the front line/service reps? What needs improvement? Do you have a mission statement that includes exceptional customer service?

A set policy/standard on customer service expectations helps your staff understand why you want to provide excellent customer service and what they have to do to succeed. While it seems like a no-brainer, today's employees don't always have the skills they need to provide the service you expect. Many don't understand the importance of service. Basic skills like smile, eye contact, greet, thank, etc. are not being done and may need to be taught.

Make it fun and interesting so the staff will enjoy the process, understand the value and perform the skills necessary. Consider how you will recognize and reward those who perform well. Statistics show that money is not the best motivator--recognition is. So before you start a program, be sure you think about what to do once results come in.

### **OBTAIN MANAGEMENT BUY-IN**

Every company is different but your management must understand and promote the importance of exceptional customer service. Many companies "talk" about how great their service is...but now it's time to "walk the talk."



Consider all the departments that will be affected by a shopper program and how each can benefit from the results. Marketing may use the improved performance in advertising/sales/reputation management. Human Resources may have to monitor/track results and/or rewards, etc. You want to be sure that all levels understand that the shopper program will improve those key skills that will drive customer loyalty and improve sales and profitability.

The shopper program should always be promoted as a tool to improve skills and measure what "we are doing right". Never take a negative approach or your staff will not buy into the program for the valuable tool that it can be.

### **TEAM UP WITH AN EXPERIENCED SHOP PROVIDER**

You need a great partner who understands your customer service standards and knows how to help you get results. With so many choices out there today, here are some key factors to look for in choosing that partner:

1. Do they have a wide variety of experience? Many providers focus on 1-2 industries. You may prefer a provider with experience in your industry but it's not necessary. A provider with different types of clients may provide more ideas and insights. You can train them on your needs; let them train you on customer service measurement.
2. Are they responsive? A company who measures your service quality better provide the best client service possible! They must respond quickly, adapt to changes easily, be open to your ideas and suggestions and most of all: appreciate your feedback and comments. This is the most important factor: are they customer-focused?
3. Do they provide web-based results? Shopper reports should be available to you quickly and *electronically*, in a format you can quickly and easily share with others. Also make sure they have a website where you can log in to view results as well as work up your own summary reports, if desired. This should not cost extra.
4. Do they allow you to customize the program? One size does NOT fit all in a shopper program. You should be able to customize the questionnaire, the shopper inquiries, types of shopper contact and inquiries. Naturally, there will be some constraints within their platforms but the human element must be customizable in order for the program to work for you. As an added feature, do ask if their software can be customized for any special needs you may have. Be



aware that branded sites and materials may cost extra but a good provider will have a platform that allows this, for a price.

5. What about shopper selection and training? Regardless of what you are told, all companies work with nearly the same databases of shoppers. Yes, they will have some shoppers they have worked with before. Companies may tell you they have a huge database of shoppers but in reality, most share the same databases, job boards and other portals to available shoppers. Look for a company that is willing to provide shoppers in the areas you need them. You want a variety of shoppers so need assurance that they will not repeat shoppers over and over. Ask about their process for finding, hiring and training shoppers. Do they have a rating system? Do they track demographics so you are sure to get a shopper who fits your customer profile? Do they have experienced shoppers? Do they use their own schedulers and shoppers or contract the work out to someone else? Be wary of a company who solely contracts your job out....they have less control over the process than one with in-house schedulers and their own shopper database.

6. How do they audit the reports? Make sure they have an audit process which is thorough and insures every report is reviewed before being sent to you. You don't want to have to deal with many reports that are not done or scores properly, etc. Hire a provider with an internal review process. Naturally, mistakes may be made once in a while, so refer back to #2 above: are they responsive if you request a change? Sometimes a situation during a shopper visit doesn't fit a pat answer...make sure you have the ability to adjust scoring when you deem it necessary. Remember, you are working with a people-based process...

7. Are they responsive? Yes, we just repeated #2 but we cannot say it enough. Mystery shopping is a people business, just like yours with the front line staff. As with your staff, not every shopper is perfect. It's how the company reacts when errors are made that counts. Your provider must give you exceptional customer service. And they should guarantee results...you don't pay if you aren't happy with a report.

## **DESIGN AN EFFECTIVE QUESTIONNAIRE**

Your shopper questionnaire/survey/report is the true key to your program. This is the "form" that the shopper completes after they make contact with your employees. It's likely that many people at your firm will have some input for what should be measured, so consider these key points:



- Look to your shop provider for help-an experience company will discuss your scenario with you and help you with the design process.
- Make the questions objective! You want the answers to be based on fact, not feeling. You want yes/no answers, or multiple choice, not ratings. Ratings are based on feeling and are very subjective so results will not be actionable.
- Measure skills that will improve overall customer service; distinct behaviors you expect your staff to perform.
- Make the questionnaire manageable so the key skills are measured in an accurate manner. Generally speaking, 20-25 questions is the maximum you should expect a good shopper to evaluate accurately.
- Insure that the shop questions are in line with your internal training. Measure what you are training and focus on actionable skills.
- Score the report. You cannot monitor or track results if you don't have a quantifiable measurement. Assign point values to positive answers. Weight those skills that are most important, if desired.

## SET A BASELINE

How do you know where you are going if you don't know where you are coming from? If your goal is to measure and improve service quality, then you must know where you are today....so you will know if you are improving.

You will find differing advice over the first round of shops to be done...should you tell your staff or not? Definitely, you don't want to shop your staff without them knowing it *and then* berate them for poor performance. Alternately, if you tell them the shoppers are coming and then send shoppers out immediately, they will put on their best behavior (like they do when management visits!). Then your results will be slightly skewed.

However, if you are going to measure customer service skills, then you have to have a baseline, a starting point in order to rave about your staff when they improve.

An effective method is to do an initial round of shopper contacts without anyone being aware. Use those results as your baseline and if you choose to share them with the front line staff, do it in a general, positive fashion only. Use the results as a kick off to announcing the shopper program: "Here's what we've done, now let's see what we can do if we work together to improve", etc. Handled properly, it will be a much more effective introduction to the program than any other.



Human nature requires us to see some facts before we can accept that we don't do as well as we think we do. A baseline set of shops will provide those facts and they can be communicated in a positive manner. That will help your staff focus more on customers.

So, to tell or not to tell? *Definitely tell* once the program is rolling on a regular basis. However, telling about the very first round of shops should ultimately be determined by you and your management team.

## USE RESULTS TO IMPROVE PERFORMANCE

Now that you have shopper reports coming in, what to do with all that data? Share the results, recognize those who do well and coach those who need improvement. This can be done on any level, from the top down. Let top executives recognize those who do well but do coaching on the local level...the employee's direct supervisor or the training department.

In order for you to act upon the data obtained, the shop results must be clear, easy to understand and focused. Make sure your shop provider will help you obtain the data summary and recommend steps you can take to improve scores and the customer experience.

Use results to:

- Recognize and/or reward those who do well
- Coach individuals on specific skills that need improvement
- Keep your staff focused on customer service at all times
- Insure training and the shop program are working for improvement
- Create an environment of teamwork and positivity
- View results with an eye on procedures: Do any company processes impede customer satisfaction? Store appearance? Accessibility?
- Encourage conversation and ultimately improvement

Remember, always keep it positive so employees know you want them to be the best they can be.

## IN CONCLUSION

It's your shopper program...so make it work for you and your company. The objective should always be to improve overall service quality. A good mystery shop partner will share that passion and do everything they can to help you achieve your goals.



## **ABOUT SHOPPERS, INC.**

Shoppers, Inc. was started by Kathy Shook in 1986 based on her passion for great customer service. So many companies talk and promote their great service, but when you actually visit, you wonder where it is. Our goal remains sharing our experience and passion to help companies who want to be the best they can be. Those who want to stand out from their competition and create loyal customers who not only keep buying but also promote that company as a great place to do business.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

The tips, best practices and advice herein are based on over 30 years' experience in the customer service business. Prior to starting Shoppers, Inc., Kathy Shook worked in the training, customer service, marketing and operations departments in the financial and travel industries. She also worked as a mystery shopper herself and coordinated a bank shopper program. She continues to work today to help companies improve their service quality with Shoppers, Inc. as a trainer and public speaker. You can follow her on Twitter: @katshook or contact her directly: [kathy@insightyoucanuse.com](mailto:kathy@insightyoucanuse.com)