



SERVING THE CUSTOMER

Customer service is all about imagination. Imagine yourself in the customer's position. What do you see now? Are things different? Stephen Hurst looks at how you discover what's really going on

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN ANGERSON

There are a million things that you want your staff to do, train your staff to do, and watch your staff doing while you are visiting their location. But what happens when you are not there? You just have to hope that your local management have the same focus on delivering an excellent customer experience that you yourself do.

However, you need eyes and ears in place to provide the information on what is happening when you are not there. Professional mystery shopping can provide those eyes and ears.

Mystery shopping works on the principle that, 'What gets measured, gets acted upon.'

You can, and should, be conducting research into customer opinions as only 'real' customers can tell you what they want from and enjoy about your operation. But 'real' customers cannot tell you what is actually happening – or more importantly, perhaps - what is not happening. Real customers do not tell you, for instance, how well your staff are selling up or selling on. In fact, we frequently find that sales are being made despite staff activities, not because of them!

Having the professional mystery shopping measurement in place, unit by unit, helps management to identify weaknesses in operation procedures, shortfalls in staff activity, and missed opportunities which, if not acted upon quickly, can soon lead to diminished profitability.

The 'trick' to mystery shopping is to develop

assessment standards, the things that you want to happen, which combine the three main elements:

- Management Imperatives: the things that you insist should happen
- Staff Abilities : the things your staff are trained or expected to do
- Customer Desires : the things your customers want or expect.

A simple example involves serving a drink at a bar. Whenever you ask customers what they want when being served a drink, one common factor will be 'a clean glass'. Management, typically, will establish facilities and procedures to ensure that all glasses are spotless. Using the best dishwashers, the hottest water, manual inspection for faults and so forth. Bar staff may check the condition of glasses when they re-stock the shelves.

But all this is hidden to the customer. They see nothing of the behind the scenes action.

The customer service action, and the standard which should be included into the mystery shopper assessment, is that the bar person should hold the glass up to check it before pouring the drink. Even though they know that the glass will be clean, the simple action of performing a visual check reinforces the message that they recognise and understand the customer need and that they want to ensure that the customer experience is perfect.

It's not rocket science – but it is what every good bar

person does every day of the year.

Imagine yourself in the customer's shoes, and see what you can do to make their experience better.

A recent mystery shopping study conducted across Europe by REACT Surveys and the MSPA (Mystery Shopping Providers Association), looked at the seemingly simple matter of queues. Most retail operations involve queues at some point in time. In fact two out of three of the outlets checked had queues at the time of the visit. But the ways that staff handle queues can have a dramatic effect on the quality of the customer experience.

The overriding fact discovered was that in the majority of outlets the customers could see that there was something that could be done to alleviate the queue, but that nothing was being done. Additional service points may have been present, but were closed, or staff could have been redirected from other operations to assist in the serving of customers. But such actions were very rarely taken. The longest wait found was of 43 minutes in a Swedish bank.

The result was that in one in five cases the customers in the queue were showing signs of dissatisfaction: grumbling to each other, openly complaining, appearing exasperated, or simply giving up and leaving the outlet.

The staff actually serving the queue had the opportunity to ease the situation. They may not have

been empowered to take direct action by summoning support or modifying their procedures, but it was within their power to make a simple customer service gesture to please the customer. As they came to serve each customer they could take a brief moment to let them know that they understood the frustration of being in a queue, that they could imagine themselves in the customer's shoes. They could apologise for the delay.

Such a simple action, but it only happened in one in fifteen queues that were mystery shopped.

There is no other method of establishing that simple fact. Mystery shopping is the only way of quantifying what happens when customers come into contact with staff; the only way of quantifying missed opportunities to exceed customer expectations and to deliver excellent service.

Mystery shopping has an important role to play in the reinforcement of customer service cultures within organisation. By providing professional, independent, objective and comprehensive reports on what happens at the customer/staff interface mystery shopping provides an stimulus to performance improvement.

SO, HOW TO GO ABOUT MYSTERY SHOPPING?

Like most business practices, mystery shopping is easy to do, but hard to do well. The concept of sending someone into your organisation to report on what they find is straightforward, but the path to completion is fraught with hazards.

The purpose of mystery shopping is to provide management information upon which business decisions can be taken. So the process has to be robust, reliable and repeatable.

No business leader would make decisions based on information from an untrained accountant, and neither should they trust mystery shopping from an untrained assessor. It is not opinion that you are seeking from a mystery shopping report it is objective fact. Not 'was it pleasant?', but 'Was it done?'.

It can be surprising how many suppliers ask mystery shoppers to report on the detail of sales and service activities without training them to understand the techniques and language involved. Trained assessors can, for instance, recognise the difference between open and closed questions, between features and benefits and between different ways of selling up, selling on and of closing the sale. Not so they can do these things themselves, but so that they can recognise when your staff are doing it to them.

You should also be seeking unbiased information. Your own staff could be used to conduct an internal mystery shopping project. Each person visiting and reporting on a nearby unit. But can you trust their reports? Do they have a hidden agenda? Are they going to 'go easy' on their colleagues because they know of the difficulties inherent in the job, or will they be unfairly harsh in the hope that their own unit will then

appear better than it is? The answer is that you just do not know – and so the information cannot be relied upon to be accurate.

Using an independent supplier, and preferably one which follows the industry codes of conduct and ethics laid down by organisations such as MSPA, helps to ensure that the reports and results can be relied upon, believed by the participants, and can form the basis for management action.

Having chosen a supplier the process of conducting a mystery shopping survey should follow these stages:

STAGE 1

Development: the process of working with the supplier to agree the standards to be assessed, eliminating ambiguity and ensuring all definitions are clear. Of agreeing the details of the scenarios to be followed by the mystery shoppers; scenarios which are testing, but fair, and which provide the opportunity for your staff to use their skills.

STAGE 2

Benchmarking: conducting a first phase of assessments in order to understand precisely what level of performance is shown by your staff at present. The results of the benchmarking phase will be used as the basis against which future improvements will be measured, and will form an important part of the launch of the programme.

STAGE 3

Launch Communication: potentially the most important stage of the process, and one which is frequently missed. Mystery shopping can be seen as a threat to staff, and thus resisted. But communicated correctly, by telling participants what is going to happen, why it will happen (using anonymous results from the benchmark survey to show just how poor performance actually is), and what will happen to the results, can allay fears. Not forgetting, what the benefits will be for participants. The recognition and incentives for a job well done.

STAGE 4

Operation: conducting the first full phase of assessment, and reporting back to participants. Not forgetting, of course, the summary reports to each and every level of management. Every level of management will be waiting for some data. The chairman may just want a single figure: are we improving? Area and regional managers will want details relevant to their responsibilities, and unit managers and staff will be eager to see how well they have performed in absolute terms, and in relation to their peers.

STAGE 5

Stimulation: just having the information is one thing, but of itself does not lead to performance improvement. The information has to be used, action plans prepared, maybe additional training scheduled – either on a unit level or possibly across the whole estate if the research shows some standards being repeatedly missed. Not forgetting the recognition and reward. Praise for high scores, prizes for exceptional performances, ensuring the promises made at the launch are kept!

STAGE 6

Repeat; a single phase cannot generate improvement. The whole cycle needs to be repeated as frequently as possible, each phase of operation leading to further stimulation and resulting in sustained improvement.

It is unlikely that mystery shopping will mean huge changes but it can increase revenue. Ask waiters whether they are offering a bottle of water, the additional side dish or the coffee and they will always say that they do. They may do but every time? Mystery shopping will put a figure on the missing revenue.

One pub chain, recently disappearing into the hands of venture capitalists, spent a million pounds a year on mystery shopping and two million on staff incentives. Asked to justify the figures the finance director pointed to specific increases in revenue directly attributable to the programme and tracked with a regular programme of surveys.

STEPHEN HURST: MANAGING DIRECTOR OF REACT



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Websites: www.reactsurveys.com – www.mysteryshop.org