

CONTRA COSTA TIMES

What lies in store for you? The mystery shoppers know

Undercover observers keep tabs on quality of service all year, not just during holiday season

By Janice De Jesus
STAFF WRITER

CONCORD -- As a single mom looking for a way to earn extra money, Diane thought becoming a mystery shopper might be just the ticket.

So she started mystery shopping years ago while living in Southern California and found it was a relatively easy way to make some extra cash, and it worked around her schedule.

Diane, who now lives in Clayton, has taken up mystery shopping again and said the activity helps her as much as it helps the companies that hire shoppers through agencies such as The Service Quality Department, a Concord-based customer service consulting and training organization.

"It's something I've always enjoyed doing," Diane said. "I don't think a lot of people are consciously aware of what they see, but unconsciously they are. You may not pay attention to the little things, but as a mystery shopper, you have to be tuned into the little things."

Mystery shopping doesn't always involve a trip to the mall.

Mystery shoppers visit banks, city offices, restaurants and movie theaters.

Sometimes a "shop" as the visits are called, can be by phone or simply by a click of the mouse. Mystery shoppers can evaluate a company's customer service by talking with one of its representatives or assess the effectiveness and accessibility of a company's Web site.

Companies hire mystery shoppers to evaluate service from a customer's perspective and to measure employee training effectiveness, said Jeffrey Kasper, president and chief innovation officer of The Service Quality Department, also known as ServiceQuality.US.

"Mystery shoppers have no agenda. They're not spies," Kasper said. "They're not out to get an employer. They're out to observe what's happening and accurately paint a portrait for our client. What mystery shoppers really do is measure the mechanics of the customer experience. They're out there to make sure certain things happen."

The certain things that typically concern companies include friendliness of employees, cleanliness of the business and quality of the products.

For instance, the customer service expectations at the Ritz-Carlton are high, so when it rains, a guest at the hotel may expect to get an umbrella for their use during their stay, Kasper said.

"But if they treat you at McDonald's they way they do at the Ritz-Carlton, you'd be blown away," he said. "Mystery shoppers check to make sure employees are doing what they should be doing, which is providing quality service."

Mystery shoppers -- 80 percent of whom are women -- are given specific guidelines of what to observe, based on a company's needs and goals.

"What a mystery shop does is gives you a snapshot of what's really happening when no one's looking," Kasper said. "The idea is not to fire employees, but give companies the opportunity to train them. The experience should open up a dialogue."

Diane said it's important that mystery shoppers maintain their anonymity -- not making their intentions obvious to employees and fellow customers by taking notes in their presence."

(Companies) want to know, did you feel safe in the parking garage, did you find parking easily, was there toilet paper in the restroom, did the person at the

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concession stand upsell you?" Diane said. "The bottom line is, were they clean and friendly and do you want to go back?"

Diane said she recalled an experience at a bank where she asked an employee a question and the employee referred her to another bank rather than ask another employee at the branch for help.

Mystery shopping has its perks. In addition to seeing a movie or eating at a restaurant for free, some companies that hire shoppers may offer them discounts on products they decide to keep.

However, when mystery shoppers buy merchandise, they generally must return it. How a shopper is treated when returning merchandise is just as important as the experience of making the purchase, Kasper said.

Immediately after a shop, mystery shoppers file their reports online so companies have prompt access to results.

Nancy of Concord said reporting results isn't difficult and that she enjoys the flexibility of mystery shopping -- she can either accept or decline an assignment.

"Anyone can shop, but you also have to be observant. You have to be able to remember the incident, who you talked to and how they looked," Nancy said.

Mystery shoppers aren't noting only negative experiences.

"Companies need to know which employees they need to deal with and which ones are doing a great job so the company knows who to give recognition to," Nancy said.

Like Diane, Nancy said mystery shoppers have to think in the same mindset as regular shoppers, but with more awareness.

"The nice part about a mystery shopping experience is people don't have a clue who I am," Nancy said. "It's my chance to help a company improve their customer service."

Both Diane and Nancy agreed that having fun is another benefit to mystery shopping.

"You're not going to retire from the money you make," Diane said. "But to pay somebody to make sure employees are doing what they're paid to do is a good thing."

**For more information about
mystery shopping can help
your business maximize each
customer interaction, call
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