

Mystery Shopping as a Training Tool

USING AUDIO AND VIDEO SHOPPING EFFECTIVELY

The assisted-living industry can look to other industries to gain insight and ideas about best business practices. One of the best practices involving training and motivation employees is mystery shopping. Progressive companies have made commitment to improve sales and customer-service skills at their facilities through effective use of mystery shopping. Highly trained and motivated employees are essential to meeting and exceeding resident and family member needs. Mystery-shopping programs that foster ongoing training opportunities, real customer feedback and, ultimately, improve sales and service performance are a standard in most customer service-focused industries. A few assisted-living companies have even ventured into high-tech mystery shopping and have been pleased with the valuable, actionable results. It is time for the assisted-living industry to fully recognize its core customer service focus and use mystery shopping to train and motivate employees.

What Is Mystery Shopping?

Mystery shopping has evolved from an innovative “big brother is watching” integrity-control method to a standard corporate practice with results that can be used in training and employee reward programs. This positive aspect of mystery shopping has eliminated most of the fear, anxiety and threat employees may feel toward mystery shopping programs. Mystery shopping consists of having a potential customer visit or call the facility and fill out a questionnaire regarding the service they received. The survey is largely composed of objective and opinion questions, such as “Would you want your relative to live here?” And, “Would you recommend this facility to others?”

Mystery-shopping programs use results in a positive manner, and can be further enhanced by audio and video. Although most companies have just begun to learn of the availability and effectiveness of “A&V Shopping,” many progressive companies insist on it. Audio taping or videotaping the facility allows the shopper to share his opinion while providing a reflection of the actual events – the shopper acts only as a medium. The tape can be reviewed to ensure the accompanying written report is objective and accurate.

Once employees have recovered from their initial uneasiness about being recorded, the tapes become an invaluable training tool. Employees are afforded the opportunity to step outside of themselves and hear and/or see what their customers experience. They are no longer paying lip service to the value of the program; they are using the program to improve their sales and service skills. This ultimately serves to improve the company’s overall performance and increases effectiveness given the indisputable and objective nature of the results.

Benefits

People learn more effectively from a combination of media. The written report coupled with the audio and visual components provides a more comprehensive and successful learning experience for employees.

- ◆ Companies can see if the training provided is being implemented into their employees' sales presentations.
- ◆ Companies can judge the overall effectiveness and value of their training programs while uncovering areas for improvement and concentration.
- ◆ Management is provided with a starting point for employee consultation and follow-up training.
- ◆ Companies can use the tapes in sales meetings and sales training.
- ◆ Companies are provided with tools that can be integrated into their employee rewards and incentive programs.
- ◆ Employees can listen to and/or see their presentations from the customers' point of view.
- ◆ Employees may evaluate and improve their own performances more effectively.
- ◆ Shopper-completed reports can be compared to the video or audio tapes to verify objectivity and accuracy.
- ◆ Tapes capture the performance of actual sales skills and techniques used by employees. This alleviates shoppers' tendencies to award good scores based on subjective qualities such as friendliness.

Who Should Use A&V Shopping?

All companies can benefit from A&V shopping. It is probably most feasible and useful for companies that are interested in evaluating their sales and marketing staff. Many assisted-living providers spend a great deal of money and time on sales-training programs; therefore, it is essential to evaluate sales performance. Home building, senior housing, financial, automotive, retirement and assisted living are some of the industries currently using audio shopping on a regular basis. Although video shopping is becoming more popular, it is not yet a standard practice.

How Audio Shopping Works

Mystery-shopping companies that offer tape-recorded, in person mystery shopping train shoppers to conceal and use micro recorders during their mystery shop or tape record initial phone calls. The shopper practices with the device at home to ensure they have placed it somewhere that is not visible, but can still clearly pick up the sales presentation. Although there are some preferred areas to conceal the device, there is no standard. Some companies use a small microphone that runs from the concealed recorder to a hidden area on the shopper or on some type of common accessory such as a pen, purse, belt or pager. This method improves the sound quality of the tape. Companies that conduct audio and non-tape recorded shops tend to use "real-customer shoppers," who specialize in mystery-shopping services.

How Video Shopping Works

Video shops may or may not include sound, depending on the company offering the service and the desires of the customer. Video shopping is conducted in much the same way as audio shopping. Just as audio shopping employs micro-recorders, video shopping requires micro-cameras, transmitting equipment and concealed video recorders. Video shoppers are normally “professional shoppers,” employed full-time by the mystery-shopping company, who travel around the country conducting video shops. The technology involved in video shopping is far more advanced and expensive than in audio shopping. Therefore, it is necessary to use highly trained, professional shoppers that can operate the equipment properly. This also eliminates issues of liability.

How Much Does It Cost?

It is difficult to provide a specific price on this type of service because many factors influence cost. However, it is estimated that adding the audio component to an in-person mystery shop increases the price of the shop by \$50 to \$100, and adding video increases the price by \$250 to \$350 per shop. In addition, companies who provide video-shopping services will often charge for expenses incurred.

It is important to note that these prices are for in-person mystery shops. Tape-recorded telephone or “telecheck” mystery shops are available at a significantly lower cost and provide a valuable training opportunity, as well. Tape-recorded, telephone mystery shops typically cost anywhere from \$25 to \$50 per call, but may cost as much as \$75 per call if follow-up reports are desired. Follow-up reports track the mail and phone follow-up efforts of the employee shopped.

How To Use Mystery Shopping Effectively

For mystery shopping to have value as a training tool, managers or trainers must be taught how to coach and train the employees based on the mystery-shopping tapes and reports. This means the written-survey tool must be based on and reinforced by company training. The managers must understand the value and meaning of the program so they can bring the mystery-shopping results to life. Sales managers and trainers who learn to review the tapes with the employees in a constructive and non-confrontational manner will benefit more from the program. Most often, mystery-shopping programs fail to reach their potential because the results are not put to adequate use. It is recommended that you hire a consultant from the mystery-shopping company to train manager in how to use mystery shopping effectively.

Three Ways To Get More for Your Mystery-Shopping Dollar

1. **Incentives and Rewards:** Management has watched sales increase significantly while holding sales contests in which the winners are largely determined by mystery-shopping scores. It is helpful to have the contests take place over a few months so employees perform as if they could be evaluated at anytime. Prizes are often cruises or trips to desirable vacation destinations.
2. **Program Consistency:** It is important to the success of the program that the mystery-shopping effort be consistently maintained. The shops must take place

- on an ongoing basis so employees must perform as if each customer is a mystery shopper. Otherwise, performance efforts may relax once the employee has received their mystery-shopping report.
3. **Results Benchmarks:** Value can be added to your mystery-shopping program by working with a company that can track employee and company scores over time, and offer trend analysis and comparison to industry standards. This enables companies to effectively track improvements and setbacks over time. Comparing company scores to industry averages allows companies to more accurately gauge their performance and determine opportunities for improvement.
 4. **Real Customers:** When feasible, mystery shoppers should match target-market profiles and be relatively new to the industry. If possible, shoppers should actually be in a situation where they need information for a real, personal situation. Real shoppers can give you a fresh customer perspective. RL

William J. Nowell is president of ServiceTRAC Inc., a Scottsdale, Arizona based training, research and consulting firm. He may be reached at (480) 941-3121.

