

# Mystery Shopper

By William J. Nowell

“We were preparing to have a big event and there I was, in my work clothes. There was no one else around, the community was a mess, I was disorganized and in walked a customer, wanting a tour.”

These were the frantic words coming from an executive director who then added, “I’m sure the couple was the mystery shopper. I know I did a terrible job and I’m going to get a terrible mystery shop score.”

I had to laugh as I explained that the shoppers had not yet been hired and that these people were real customers. She was relieved that the account of what had just taken place was not going to be relayed to anyone else. I swore a vow of secrecy, but the incident points up many of the reasons why a community might benefit from using a mystery shopper service.

If used as part of a total management information system, a mystery shopping service can be instrumental in helping a company set and maintain excellent standards in customer service, sales presentation and follow up, employee morale, training effectiveness and competitor information. Obviously achieving excellence in these areas will add up to a more successful community, more money on the bottom line and more importantly, happier customers.

A mystery shopper audit can provide a look at your community and employees from a different view point. Today’s customer expects quality in both service and product. Knowing what he or she thinks of your operation is extremely valuable, especially when compared to the cost of getting a qualified prospect into your community.

*The Platinum Rule: Treat customers the way they want to be treated.*

## Customer Service

The promise of excellent service is often used to attract customers, but it can become a liability if the promise is hollow. Customer service is an area where the golden rule does not apply. We should not treat the customers the way we would want to be treated; rather, we should follow the Platinum Rule: Treat customers the way they want to be treated.

Determining exactly how your customers want to be treated can be difficult because we, as industry professionals, can’t be unbiased customers. We don’t see what the customer sees.

At times, we may focus on areas that aren’t important to the customers at all. For example, one community’s mystery shopper audit revealed that, as a prospect entered,

she couldn't find the receptionist desk. After she wandered through the community, a concerned resident noticed her bewildered look and guided her back to the receptionist. Management had never thought much about the situation until then.

Additional inquiries were made with other customers and residents. The director discovered that it was not uncommon for one of the double doors leading to the administrative offices to be closed, and the receptionist was often so busy with paper work that she seldom looked up.

Using other information supplied by the audit and the follow-up inquiry, the director made further changes and three months later received the highest resident satisfaction scores in the company. These changes, though minor, had a major impact on the community as a whole and the new, improved receptionist team was better able to greet and help guests and create a positive first impression.

## **Sales Presentation**

Being part of an effective sales presentation is like performing in a well-practiced orchestra. The music will not sound right unless every instrument is playing in sync and in tune.

Likewise, for the sales presentation to go well, every aspect of the community has to come together in a way that demonstrates that your community is different and better than your competition in the areas that are important to the customer. Unfortunately, if any aspect of that presentation is not in harmony, your community could be performing like an elementary school band; it's nice but maybe not the kind of event for which you would buy an expensive ticket.

Sales personnel don't usually get much customer feedback and what they do get comes in the form of cold, hard statistics at the end of each week. When the performance isn't what was hoped for, it may not be clear which instrument isn't in tune. And when the numbers are good, you may not be sure why. A mystery shop audit can be helpful in determining what is and isn't working so management can fine tune the process without stopping the music.

In one poorly performing community, a mystery shop was performed and among other issues, the report indicated that the sales person's attire was not appropriate and the presentation was done poorly and quickly. The sales person seemed rushed and the customer felt unappreciated. The needs of the customer were not identified and the sale was neither asked for nor achieved.

The community itself was in minor disrepair, which left the customer with a low overall impression of the community. On this particular day, the competitor was the winner. This feedback was presented to the executive director and his staff. All received further training and the results were very positive. The sales person immediately improved in all areas. The maintenance employees, along with other staff members, increased their efforts and the appearance of the community began to improve.

No one likes to lose, and when the employees know what they need to do, it's just a matter of time and effort. Three months later, the community was closing twice the sales with the same number of leads. The follow-up mystery shops also confirmed what was already suspected. The community was running much more smoothly and a potentially poor situation was turned around.

### **Training Effectiveness**

Before employees are evaluated as to their performance, they need to know exactly what to do and how to do it. For instance, clean does not mean the same thing to all people. Employees need ongoing evaluation and feedback as to the quality of their work. The rule of thumb is that each time a job is performed at a lower standard and is unnoticed, that level of performance is the new standard. Also, employee turnover, on-the-job injuries, low morale and unhappy residents can usually be tracked to inadequate training and follow-up.

Due to limited resources for providing this training, most of the burden has shifted to already stretched line managers. It is now more important than ever to make sure that the limited resources are used effectively and targeted accurately.

When training is given, it is important to follow it up with an evaluation. An extensive sales training session at a community devoted a considerable amount of time to how to ask a prospect to move in. Role playing was done and the training appeared effective. Subsequent mystery shop revealed, however, that one sales person still did not feel comfortable with the process. Additional training was done and a later mystery shop had positive results.

How many prospects would have toured and then been allowed to leave with no invitation to move in? A missed opportunity can cost hundreds of thousands of dollars.

### **Competitor Information**

In our business it's often not how good we are, but how our strengths and weaknesses compare to our competition and how closely we match the needs of our target market that determine our success. A good marketing program must identify and understand this information and make sure that the information is accessible, allowing everyone concerned to improve in the areas indicated, giving your community the edge on the competition.

A recent audit performed on a luxury community in the Southwest revealed that the community was very well run and provided quality service in every aspect. Sales, however, were sluggish. The audit also revealed that the two top competitors were rated equally good and the differences were not noticeable to the consumer. Based on this finding, the community made a slight price adjustment and the sales were quickly back on track. If management had acted without this information, costly changes might have been made and sales still would be sluggish.

Mystery shopping should not be used exclusively in decision making but should be included as part of the total management information system. As professionals, we lose, to some extent, our ability to be unbiased, objective customers. A mystery shop program can improve customer satisfaction, provide valuable performance feedback, target resource allocation, sharpen your competitive edge and improve you bottom line

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