

It's a mystery

Dennis Reid takes the mystery out of mystery shopping and shows how a little DIY delving can help your business

When the cat's away, the mice will play'. Just think what happens to a classroom full of quiet, well-behaved children when the teacher leaves them unattended.

While you know (or hope) your staff won't start shrieking, jumping up on the counter and throwing the stock around when you're not in the store, they may have a tendency to slack off a bit. Perhaps they will be a little slower at approaching customers, or take less time to find out what the customer is looking for before going into the demonstration.

And even if you have the perfect team, 100% of the time, it's easy (for them and you) to get too close to the business. Remember that other saying: 'You can't see the wood for the trees'? Sometimes we need to stand back or, better still, get someone else to do it for us; someone who is not involved. What you need is a mystery shopper!

It's a tough world out there and you must take full advantage of every selling opportunity. Every store in your operation should be mystery shopped on a regular basis. You want to know that each person who walks into your store gets the best possible service and that every attempt is made to convert that shopper into a buyer. And what was the shopping experience like, or the store atmosphere – something it's easy to take for granted when it's your everyday place of work.

There are many companies that offer mystery-shopping services for a fee, but they may not be the best or most cost efficient way to go. The criteria on which they base their report may be different from yours.

DIY mystery shopping

To obtain the information that you want, set up your own service. First, develop a mystery shopping report. Be as specific as possible. For example, if you want to be certain that your salespeople are consistently trying to add on to every sale, don't just phrase the question as "Did the salesperson attempt to sell you an additional item?" A 'yes' or 'no' answer will not give you the entire picture. Break down the question:

1. How many items did the salesperson try to sell you? One/Two/Three/Four/Five

2. Did the salesperson suggest another item before you decided on the first item? Yes/No

3. Did the salesperson ever show you a second item? Yes/No

4. Was the second item:

a) a possible alternative if you didn't like the first item?

b) a similar model, price or brand to the first item?

c) a completely different item?

5. If you took the second item, did the salesperson try to add on yet another item? Yes/No

Now, not only will you know if the salesperson attempted to add on, you'll also know how much, how often, and the type of item.

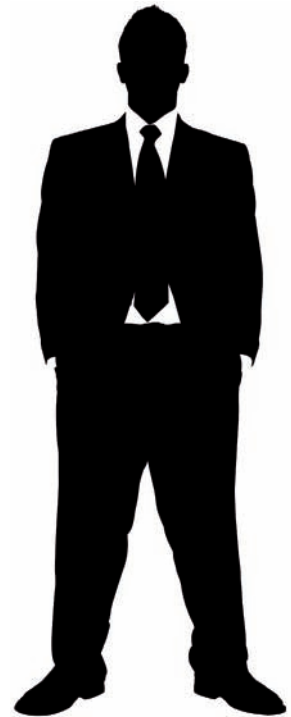
Your report should cover all the steps of a sale, from how the salesperson approached the shopper to whether they said 'thank you'. Often a yes/no question, followed by a brief explanation, will work just as well as a six-part question.

Once you have your report, you'll need people to complete it. You can recruit friends to shop for you at a nominal fee, or run a 'help wanted' ad in your local newspaper. The heading: 'Want to earn extra money while you shop?' followed by a brief explanation is sure to draw response. Depending on the geographic location of your store, you may be able to get great shopping reports for as little as £10 each. You'll have to meet briefly with your hired shoppers to go over the report and explain what you're really looking for.

After reviewing the completed shopping reports, you should formally praise or reward those salespeople who received good reports. And likewise, salespeople should be informed of poor reports and held accountable.

But, don't stop there. Once you know how your staff are doing and how your shop is perceived, check out your competition. Just remember, sending someone to mystery shop your competition is not a replacement for going there yourself; it just gives an outsider's viewpoint to how your business is running.

Using mystery shoppers is a simple, inexpensive and effective way of keeping your staff on their toes. And if you listen open-mindedly to what your 'shoppers' have to say it could help keep your business in good shape and make it a place that customers want to come back to.



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