

Protocols for Mystery Shoppers – COVID-19

Purpose:

In May 2020, MSPA Europe/Africa released protocols for its members regarding face-to-face mystery shopping during the Covid-19 period. The document listed several safety and prevention recommendations regarding management of clients, projects and shoppers.

MSPA Europe/Africa recognises that mystery shoppers are a key component part of our industry. In a bid to provide services to clients and mitigate risks during the pandemic, the association has decided to create and release a specific set of protocols designed to support our fieldworkers.

The purpose of this document is to provide advice to mystery shoppers regarding the protocols to consider when face-to-face mystery shopping during the period of easing and removal of lockdown, and the return to working in the countries covered by our membership.

Important Disclaimer to Mystery Shoppers:

- MSPA Europe/Africa is providing these recommendations in good faith based on our broad understanding of the interventions to the COVID-19 pandemic as applied by our members and their mystery shoppers;
- As such, MSPA Europe/Africa cannot in any way be held liable for these recommendations and are sharing advice to generate a common understanding amongst members and their mystery shoppers;
- From what is known to date about Covid-19, there are some demographic characteristics and health conditions that may increase the risk of infection, the severity of symptoms and the fatality rate. It is your responsibility, as a mystery shopper, to self-assess your risk factors and to make an informed decision on whether you should accept a mystery shopping assignment. A mystery shopping provider cannot be held liable for your decision to accept an assignment;
- Above all, MSPA Europe/Africa members and mystery shoppers must always comply with the specific legislative requirements of their local authorities, these take precedence over any advice herein;
- Further, mystery shoppers must keep themselves abreast of local developments and stay informed about updates from government, health departments and related authorities in the areas in which they operate.

Our goal with this document is to ensure, whenever possible, the prevention of infection and transmission of infection as a result of mystery shopping activity.

Recommended Steps:

Before accepting the assignment:

Mystery shoppers should assess the current situation in their country / region / city and whether there are restrictions in place (e.g. for what purpose it is permitted to leave the house, any mobility restrictions which apply, etc.).

Mystery shoppers should complete a self-assessment of their risk factors and decide whether it is the right decision for them to accept any mystery shopping work.

Mystery shoppers should complete a self-assessment of their health and must not accept any assignment if they feel sick / ill, have a cough, fever or any symptom their local health authority identifies as an indicator of infection. In addition to this, mystery shoppers must not accept any face-to-face assignment if they have had contact, in the last 14 days, with any positive case of Covid-19 and/or any person that had symptoms of the infection (even if they have not been tested yet).

Before starting fieldwork:

Mystery shoppers need to review the questionnaire and safety guidelines provided by a mystery shopping provider. Whenever possible, peak hours should be avoided for obvious reasons. Mystery shoppers need to check with their mystery shopping provider(s) if there are any restrictions on visit timings.

Mystery shopping providers have been advised to make available a dedicated communication channel, to facilitate feedback about safety issues during fieldwork. Mystery shoppers should make sure they understand how to report any problems ASAP, so the provider can notify the client and corrective measures may be implemented more expediently.

When planning visits, mystery shoppers should consider that it might take longer to complete evaluations due to the fact in many places there are restrictions on the number of people allowed inside the stores. They should also consider that businesses may be operating for reduced hours and/or by appointment only.

Another key safety point is for shoppers to only bring absolutely necessary items with them when carrying out visits. Be aware of the risks of cross-contamination, specially with mobile phone, reading glasses, keys and sunglasses. They should remember to bring a pen to fill in any forms and/or make notes as necessary. Mystery shoppers are advised to wear a face mask during visits and to use hand sanitiser before and after evaluations take place (min. 70% alcohol). They should ensure they have enough supply to cover their visit schedule each day.

During fieldwork:

On the day of the visit, mystery shoppers should check their body temperature and assess whether they have any symptoms of infection. In addition, they should not proceed to fieldwork if they have had contact, in the last 14 days, with any infected or symptomatic person. Mystery shopping providers must be notified immediately if there is a perceived risk on the basis of the above. At this difficult and stressful time, it's not sensible or logical to assume that it "maybe just a flu" or due to the allergy season.

Safety is an absolute top priority:

As a general rule, MSPA Europe/Africa has set protocols for mystery shopping providers that clearly indicate that mystery shoppers can cease their visits at any time if they feel at risk. Where there is evidence that the location is not complying with any of the local legislations or client-specific requirements relating to COVID-19:

- Mystery shoppers should not be asked to complete an assignment if that may represent a significant risk. For example, if a mystery shopper enters a store and the employees are not wearing a face mask (in countries where it is mandatory) or the amount of customers is clearly above the maximum limit allowed due to the need of physical distancing, the mystery shopper should consider the visit as completed (if possible taking a photo as proof) and report the results as established at that point;
- Mystery shoppers should not be penalised (financially and/or their grading [visit/shop score]) for not completing the whole visit for reasons that they cannot control;
- However, mystery shopping providers may agree, **in advance**, a reduction in payment when the duration of the visit and thereby the amount of work is considerably reduced if the assessment is not completed in its entirety.
- Mystery shoppers should never be asked to act in a way that contravenes local government regulations in order to test a retail outlet remedial action, e.g. asking shoppers to not wear a face mask and see if they are asked to wear one by store staff.

Mystery shoppers need to be vigilant about their behaviour, to minimise the risk of infection throughout the end-to-end process. Here are a few examples:

- Whenever possible, avoid public transportation;
- Mystery shoppers should put the face masks on before entering the store. Hand hygiene should be a priority, MSPA Europe/Africa recommends using hand sanitiser, at least, before entering a store and as soon as they leave the location;
- Maintain social distancing according to local legislation (for example 1, 1.5 or 2 metres);
- Whenever possible, lifts (elevators) should be avoided;

- When interacting with employees, mystery shoppers need to be aware of how their own behaviour might trigger unsafe behaviours, for example, they should not initiate a handshake and be mindful of safe distancing when approaching staff;
- During the visit, avoid handling products and touching surfaces as much as possible. Special care must be taken when visiting toilets (never place your bags on the floor, for example; If you need to touch the doorknob, do so with a disposable paper tissue of sanitise your hands immediately);

Depending on the type of business, there are several surfaces that the mystery shopper needs to be mindful of, such as doors, chairs, menus or brochures, touchscreens, telephones, samplers, business cards, water bottles, shopping baskets and trolleys, etc.

- Mystery shoppers should limit the visit to the necessary amount of time to complete the assessment. Contact with employees should be brief and focused on the point of the visit;
- Whenever possible, mystery shoppers should avoid using cash: Using a debit or credit card, preferably with contactless payments is recommended;
- Mystery shoppers must follow the safety rules being implemented in store, for example they should cooperate if businesses are checking temperatures or if they are asking customers to sanitise their hands onsite, before entering the premises.
- The virus may remain for many hours on shopping bags, clothes, shoes, etc., depending on the materials it comes into contact with. When arriving back home, mystery shoppers are advised to remove their shoes before entering the house, then change their clothes and shower ASAP.
- When accepting multiple assignments, mystery shoppers need to be especially aware of the risks of cross-contamination from store to store.

After fieldwork:

When reporting the results, mystery shoppers should detail any issues they may have faced relating to Covid-19 during the visits. Check the questionnaire to see whether there is a specific area for this information to be communicated.

Finally, if a mystery shopper tests positive for Covid-19 or develop symptoms of infection within 14 days of fieldwork being completed, they should notify their mystery shopping provider and not accept fieldwork again until they are fully recovered/have tested negative.