

November 2026
By Meta Arh, CEO of Temidia & Co-Founder and Partner of Arhea

Mystery Shopping – A Strategic Mirror of Customer Experience

Where mystery shoppers once counted smiles, they now measure something much more valuable: how your customers really feel when they interact with your brand.

Years ago, we provocatively asked whether mystery shopping was passé. Today, we can firmly state it's more strategically important than ever. It is no longer only a tool for checking whether standards are met, but a key way for companies to understand what customers actually experience, where brand promises fall short, and how to translate customer experiences into concrete improvements. As various studies and white papers point out, it is increasingly becoming an advanced insight and decision-support tool for management. This is why the global mystery shopping market is projected to grow by double digits year on year

From checklists to behavioral and emotional diagnostics

For many years, mystery shopping was almost synonymous with a checklist: Did the salesperson greet the customer? Did they ask about a loyalty card? Was the space clean? These things still matter, but today mystery shopping's key role is to look deeper, collecting information not only about what happened, but also how it happened and its emotional impact. By describing:

- how they felt;
- whether the employee’s explanation was clear and easy to understand;
- whether they experienced doubt or frustration;



- whether the experience was simple and seamless across all channels and touchpoints;
- which moments of the experience truly stayed with them;

Mystery shoppers conduct not only a procedural but also an emotional evaluation, giving insight into the experience's emotional highs and lows.

Mystery shopping as a strategic mirror

Many still see mystery shopping as about “catching employees making mistakes”. Modern programmes take the opposite approach: mystery shopping acts as a mirror, revealing where brand promises and actual experiences diverge – the gap between what a brand promises and what a customer feels. In doing so, it highlights discrepancies and what needs to change.

These insights become even more valuable when we use the same scenarios to assess competitors’ customer experiences and identify where they perform better (e.g., speed, personalisation, or empathy). Seen this way, the mystery shopper becomes an ally, providing a real customer perspective that helps employees and management align service standards and company culture with customer expectations.

AI is not a replacement, but an assistant

Some companies are now asking whether they still need mystery shopping in an era of AI and NPS. Most credible professional sources say AI does not make mystery shopping redundant. Rather than replacing conventional mystery shopping, AI primarily supports data

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collection, quality control, and analysis. People (mystery shoppers and analysts), however, provide context, understanding, and narrative: vivid, richly described real-world situations.

That is precisely why the people involved matter. Robust programmes rely on carefully selected and trained mystery shoppers who undergo recruitment, assessments of communication and observation skills, test assignments, and persistent monitoring of reporting quality, allowing management to trust their findings when making decisions.

Part of the Research ecosystem, not a standalone exercise

Mystery shopping delivers the greatest added value when it is not an isolated project to be "ticked off" once a year. The most successful organisations integrate its findings into the wider Research ecosystem:

- Assess the omnichannel experience by evaluating the website, contact centre, email communication, and physical branch as part of a single customer journey – an approach already used in many programmes.
- Link it to NPS and satisfaction surveys; the numbers reveal where problems exist, while mystery shopping shows how those problems show up in customer engagements and advocacy.
- Link mystery shopping to internal education and training – real stories from reports become material for workshops, role-playing, coaching and mentoring.
- Corelate mystery shopping measured events with sales data, advocacy and loyalty

In this way, mystery shopping findings can genuinely and constructively produce tangible changes that strengthen a company's position in an increasingly competitive environment. This is especially important for omnichannel experiences, as a single customer journey

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today commonly spans a website, an app, a contact centre, and a physical branch. Differences between what is promised online and what happens on the ground are often precisely where customers lose trust.

Three highly useful benefits of mystery shopping

1. **You see how customers feel, not just what the numbers on dashboards say.**
   You see the emotional dynamics, feelings of safety, trust, or discomfort, and moments of confusion and irritation - the things that determine whether a customer stays, recommends you, or leaves.

2. **It connects the "how much" with the "why".**
   Sales data and NPS show the current situation and potential deviations from expectations, while mystery shopping explains what is really happening on the front line of customer interactions.

3. **It reduces CX risks and provides an ideal testing ground for scenarios.**
   You are able to systematically test how your systems and employees respond to vulnerable customers, complex products, complaints, price changes, and the introduction of new channels. In regulated industries (financial services and insurance), it also helps reduce regulatory risk by identifying inappropriate practices earlier.



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Why all of this matters right now

The market is changing at an extraordinary pace: new channels, new technologies, new regulations, and rapidly shifting customer expectations. In this environment, companies need a tool that is simultaneously:

- **human** – because it understands feelings and context;
- **data-driven** – because it can be effectively connected with other analytical sources (NPS, VoC, and sales KPIs);
- **operational** – because it shows what is actually happening on the ground and where changes must occur.

When executed well, that tool is still mystery shopping – but it is very different today from what it was ten or fifteen years ago. It has evolved from a “secret shopper” into a strategic partner that helps manage customer experience, sales, and risk.

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