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By Yana Tishkina, Director of business development Kazakhstan, [4Service Holdings](#)

Mystery Shopping in International Aviation: Experience of Comprehensive Customer Service Measurement

Sector / Location (Generalized)

The project was implemented in the international aviation sector, where the number of customer touchpoints is significantly higher than in most other industries. The work was carried out under strict confidentiality, without using the client's internal data in the public domain. All examples and conclusions are presented in a highly generalized form.

Why Is It Important to Measure?

In aviation, the customer journey includes dozens of interactions - from ticket purchase to baggage claim. Parts of these processes are delivered in different countries by various teams and contractors and are not always fully controlled by a single organization.

Measuring service quality through Mystery Shopping makes it possible to:

- assess the end-to-end customer experience rather than individual elements;
- verify how standards work in a real-life environment, not only on paper;
- identify levels of professionalism and employee engagement at different stages of the journey;
- compare the performance of different channels: contact center, ground services, onboard service, etc.;
- identify bottlenecks in the customer journey map (CJM) and detect “moments of truth” - both positive and those requiring improvement;
- understand how contextual factors (flight type, service conditions, time of day, etc.) influence passenger perception.

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A separate research objective was to identify relationships that are not visible in operational metrics but become evident at the level of emotional experience. In one of the project waves, these hypotheses were tested experimentally, allowing the improvement program to be fine-tuned more precisely.

Why Use an MSPA Member Company?

Selecting an MSPA member company was a key requirement of the tender. This ensured:

- guaranteed methodological quality and adherence to international industry best practices;
- client confidence that the program would be designed by experts capable of providing insights and recommendations, not just collecting data;
- compliance with the MSPA Code of Professional Standards and Ethics, including:
 - integrity and absence of data falsification;
 - protection of confidential and personal data;
 - objectivity and independence of results.

At the very first presentation stage, the client raised questions about data reliability. Reference to MSPA standards became a decisive factor in strengthening trust in both the methodology and the provider.

Why Use Mystery Shopping?

A consumer-based Mystery Shopping model was selected for the project. The evaluators were not professional “career” mystery shoppers but real passengers who underwent individual training.

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Key features of the approach included:

- detailed pre-briefing and training for each participant;
- real-time online support and the opportunity to rehearse the scenario before execution;
- no remuneration beyond flight cost compensation, which ensured natural participant behavior;
- the ability to evaluate not only operational standards but also the emotional dimension of service and compare it with brand promises and expectations.

Mystery Shopping is the only method that allows service to be seen through the customer's eyes, in a natural environment, without the staff being influenced by the awareness of being evaluated.

What Was the Project Background?

The initiative emerged after representatives of a major airline became familiar with the results of a Mystery Shopping project conducted for another company within the same group, operating in the low-cost segment. After observing the effectiveness of the approach, they initiated an international tender. The preparation process took nearly a year, resulting in the development of a large-scale, comprehensive customer experience measurement program.

What Were the Project Specifics?

The project was highly complex. Key challenges included:

- the ability to evaluate not only operational standards but also the emotional dimension of service and compare it with brand promises and expectations.

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- broad geographic coverage across multiple countries;
- recruiting mystery shoppers matching a very strict profile - essentially training participants from scratch;
- difficulties in accurately completing detailed questionnaires, with several surveys sometimes required for a single route;
- zero tolerance for error: each flight had to be executed strictly according to instructions, with no possibility of re-runs.

Nevertheless, due to thorough preparation and multi-level data validation, the project was delivered in full.

What Were the Results? (Without Data Disclosure)

Results were presented to the client in aggregated and segmented formats without revealing sensitive information. The outcomes enabled the client to:

- obtain a realistic picture of standard execution across different touchpoints;
- assess discrepancies between operational performance and emotional perception of service;
- identify areas where standards were applied effectively and those requiring additional training or process adjustments;
- define priority focus areas for improvement.

The comprehensive study spanned numerous international aviation routes and domestic touchpoints, covering a wide geographic footprint across multiple continents. The assessment covered a total more than 30 trips in the first wave and 50+ trips in the second, encompassing domestic routes cover all Kazakhstan regions and international flights to Europe and Asia destinations.

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The project generated significant, quantifiable results across two distinct waves, demonstrating clear improvements in service delivery and emotional perception.

Consistent tracking across two distinct waves provided clear evidence of positive trends in overall service standards and customer emotional perception over time. Segmented results across different service classes and sales channels offered unique insights, enabling targeted improvements where performance gaps were identified.

What Were the Commercial Benefits?

Although Mystery Shopping is considered a qualitative research method, the project delivered tangible commercial value:

- service standard adjustments reduced operational losses and increased process stability;
- improved customer experience directly influenced repeat purchases, loyalty, NPS, and, consequently, revenue;
- optimized cross-department collaboration shortened response times to customer issues;
- the company gained scalable evaluation tools applicable to future waves.

Conclusion

After the first year, key development areas were identified, and several standards that proved insufficiently effective in practice were optimized.

In the second wave, growth in overall standard compliance scores was recorded, alongside consistently high emotional service perception among passengers.

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An unexpected yet highly valuable outcome was the unification of adjacent departments: they began jointly reviewing each questionnaire, aligning interpretations, and developing a shared approach to customer experience. By the third wave, Mystery Shopping had evolved from a control tool into a mechanism for cross-functional development of service culture.
