

Mystery Shopping Q&A with our MD

As MD and Company Owner of ABA Quality Monitoring, Kate Jacobson has over 30 years' experience within the Mystery Shopping Industry. It was great to have the opportunity to catch up and get her perspective on all things Mystery Shopping.

Why should businesses use Mystery Shopping as a CX measurement tool?

Done well, Mystery Shopping is an invaluable tool in understanding and improving the customer experience. It can be used in isolation, either as a one-off project or regular programme to keep track of what is happening at the 'coal-face', and it can complement other measurement tools such as Customer Satisfaction (C-SAT) and Voice of Customer (VOC) programmes.

Mystery Shopping helps to embed the service strategy that other research tools have shaped and provides a vehicle of communication with frontline service teams, reinforcing the behaviours that are expected.

Having an established Mystery Shopping programme in place demonstrates to both customers and employees the importance that is placed on the customer experience and is a proven tool in improving the customer experience. This in turn leads to increased customer loyalty and an uplift in revenue.

What does a good Mystery Shopping programme look like?

Mystery Shopping comes in lots of different shapes and sizes – there is no one size fits all. The scope and nature of each project needs to be determined by the primary research objectives, with these objectives listed in priority order so the overriding goal is not lost. For example, measuring the impact of training, measuring compliance to promotions or topical events, or placing service front & centre within the organisation – each of the objectives require a different approach.

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Some clients come to us with a very clear idea of what they want, or think they want, but first and foremost we must understand what they want to achieve and then we work together to shape a project that meets their individual requirements.

What do you consider to be the most important factor in running a successful Mystery Shopping programme?

For a Mystery Shopping programme to drive positive change, it must work for the frontline teams who deliver the service. To drive engagement, the programme needs to be positioned positively, with the assessment criteria measuring what is the direct control of the frontline teams and with full transparency of the expected behaviours. The programme can be an invaluable communication tool to drive desired service behaviours through positive reinforcement and should be a celebration of colleagues who are 'caught' doing the right thing.

What are the common mistakes made when using Mystery Shopping?

Whilst it is important to build in a degree of flexibility to every programme as customer expectations of 'what good looks like' continuously evolve, it is equally important to avoid feature creep or introduce unrealistic customer behaviour through targeting unusual 'customer missions'. Every change request should be considered against the original (or reviewed) programme objectives to ensure the programme remains on track with long-term business requirements.

When it comes to questionnaire content, we have learnt that 'less is more', and it is important to resist the temptation to continuously add more questions in a belief this adds value for money. Focusing attention of the behaviours that matter most and have the greatest impact to the customer experience allows actionable insight to be easily identified.

What are the current trends in Mystery Shopping?

In the early 2000s, we noticed a shift away from 'traditional' Mystery Shopping, with organisations using real customers to tell them about their experiences, and the advent of 'big data' giving companies unprecedented insight into consumer preferences. Mystery Shopping still had its place

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but was more frequently used as a means of measuring compliance to external regulations rather than a means of measuring the customer experience.

However, the limitations of relying solely on Voice of Customer programmes are increasingly recognised, with 'survey-fatigued' consumers being motivated to share only the service extremes rather than the everyday experience. With this shift, coupled with the pandemic where we have collectively realised the importance of face-to-face human interaction, we are now seeing an uplift in the use of Mystery Shopping. Organisations are harnessing the power of Mystery Shopping to:

- Reset service behaviours with the frontline teams
- Better understand the 'every day' CX
- Measure the success of training initiatives, with this being of greater importance given the current volatility of employee retention and recruitment
- Shine a spotlight on service and place it front and centre within their organisation
- Communicate positively with the frontline teams
- Demonstrate the value each employee has through reward and recognition
- Identify ways to exceed customer expectations and drive loyalty

How do you see Mystery Shopping evolving in the future?

There will continue to be an uptick in its use, with service-focused organisations using a hybrid of different CX measurement tools to help them improve the customer experience. It will – once again – become more commonplace for organisations to have a regular Mystery Shopping programme in place, rather than relying solely on VOC and C-SAT.

The flexibility of Mystery Shopping to measure all or part of the customer journey and look at the omni-experience rather than siloed channels will help to drive its popularity as a research tool.

Perhaps the biggest shift will be that Mystery Shopping will be used to improve not just the customer experience but the employee experience too. Organisations will use Mystery Shopping to communicate with and celebrate their employees through a positive tool that recognises and rewards excellence and helps to demonstrate the value placed on each employee.