

The Relevance of Mystery Shopping in today's world

Recently a colleague commented that she thought Mystery Shopping was "something from fifteen years ago". This caused me to reflect on the role of Mystery Shopping in our company.

When Mystery Shopping emerged in the 1940s, its primary role was the control of employees integrity. Today, however, its role is or should be different.

Modern Mystery Shopping is an effective method to help companies check their compliance with the service standards.

Modern Mystery Shopping checks how close their actual customer service is to what the company wants to offer them. But where does it almost go sideways?

1. Service standards represent the basis for the quality implementation of a Mystery Shopping program. But 'standards' are often based on the general stages of the sales process only, and they do not enable them to be different from their competitors. The absence of service standards also limits the execution of Mystery Shopping. As shoppers cannot check whether employees comply with the standards or not, the possibility of subjectivity increases.
2. There is an increasing belief that **companies can get all the needed information with simple feedback systems (like NPS)** and do not need Mystery Shopping anymore. They certainly play an important role, but they only cover customers' perspectives and overlook the company's perspective. For example, customers may not report whether the employee tried hard enough to close the sale during the visit, whether they also offered them additional products, tried to upsell or cross-sell, etc.

September 2021

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Modern Mystery Shopping is becoming an essential part of service design.

Mystery Shopping is one of the **key sources of information for service diagnostics**. It can show whether employees comply with the company's service standards, whether they try hard to retain customers, and whether they show genuine goodwill. Moreover, it can offer an **objective snapshot of the situation when the company does not have service standards**. It shows how the service works, how consistent it is across different units, where the critical points are, how the service differs from the competitors' service, etc.

In addition, **Mystery Shopping of competitors shows where their advantages and disadvantages** are and how we can exploit their weaknesses. If we link these findings with customer research, we can find **a gap between what customers expect and what we offer them**. Staff who are in direct contact with customers also know a lot about them. So collecting the voice of the customer through your employees (VoCE) is a valuable tool, too.

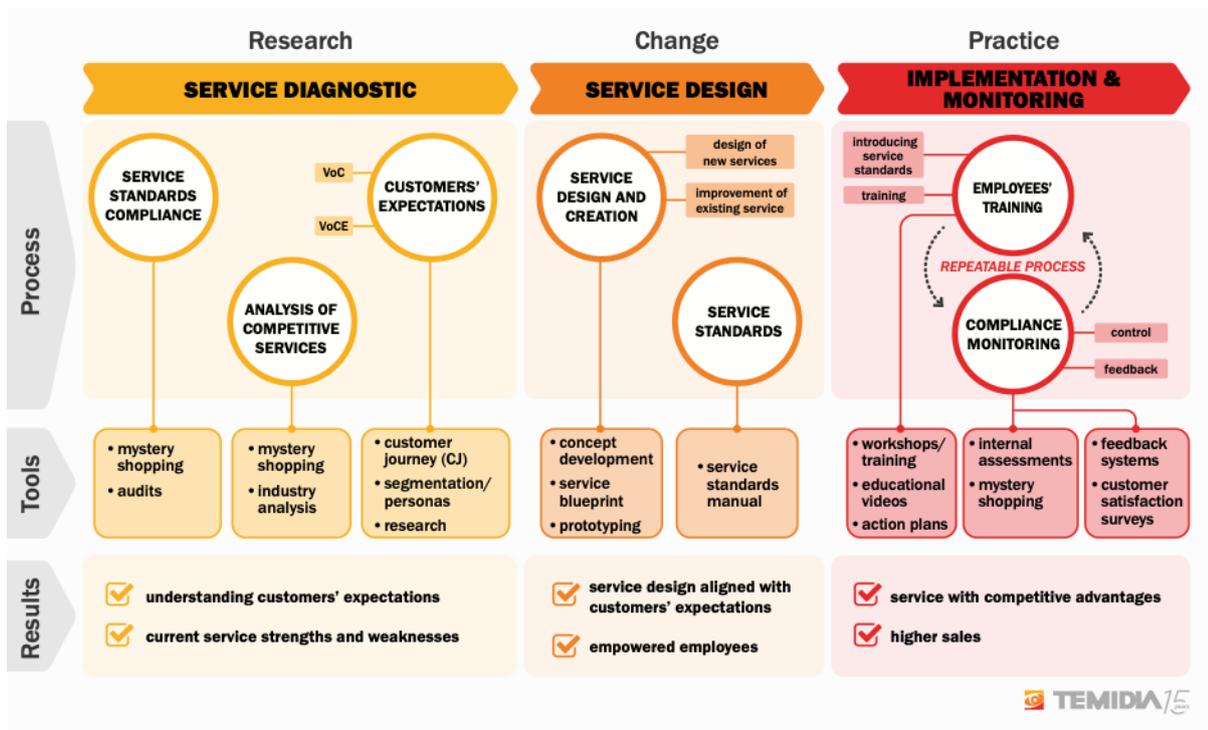
Good knowledge of your customers, their customer journey (CJ) and expectations, and recognition of your current strengths and weaknesses represent an entry point into the service (re)design, which will align with customer expectations.

Based on the findings of comprehensive service diagnostics, service design can then focus on designing and improving parts of the service that prove to be problematic.

Even the entire service can be (re)designed and developed to establish a link between the real needs of your customers and the company's capabilities.

Such actions also improve operational efficiency (OX) and maximize customer experience (CX). They are also beneficial for employees as they are empowered and have more time to deal with

customers. All these improvements result in increased customer and employee satisfaction, loyalty, higher sales, and differentiation.



So, is Mystery Shopping *passé* or 'in'?

It is certainly *passé* to use Mystery Shopping as a means to control or punish employees, but it is one of the essential tools companies can use in a positive way – for example in our company, in the process of service diagnostics and in the phase of monitoring the implementation of set service standards. It represents a continuous source of information on where improvements are needed. In doing so, it also contributes to the protection of the brand – as it helps deliver the brand's promises to the customers.

It is essential that Mystery Shopping is professionally set up and carried out, that it objectively assesses the service standards' implementation, and provides qualitative insights. At

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the same time, it needs to offer **subjective impressions of mystery shoppers, which can be a valuable contribution to the continuous improvement** of the company's operations.

Responsibility for the Mystery Shopping program's relevance thus lies on both sides - the Mystery Shopping provider and the client.

- **Companies need to design their services according to customer expectations,** involve and empower their employees, and clearly define and communicate their service standards.
- **Mystery Shopping specialists must actively co-design the Mystery Shopping program,** ensure quality execution, and participate in developing their clients' services.

Service standards need to be updated frequently, every two to three years, especially in today's times when customer behaviour and expectations have changed considerably.
