



**Advisory Guidelines**  
**for Mystery Shopping in Europe**

**September 2003**



## **MSPA EUROPE GUIDELINES ON MYSTERY SHOPPING**

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### **PART A: INTRODUCTION**

The Mystery Shopping Providers Association (MSPA) is dedicated to improving service and promoting excellence in the mystery shopping industry. A fundamental aim of the Association is to ensure that standards are maintained. To improve the value, reputation and stimulate the use of mystery shopping services, it is important that information about mystery shopping services is accurately communicated to both the business community and the public at large, while complying with applicable government laws, regulations and ordinances.

These Guidelines should be read in conjunction with the MSPA Ethics Code and be applied in relation to the relevant country laws and regulations. The main aim of these Guidelines is to promote professionalism in the conduct of mystery shopping and to ensure consistency amongst MSPA members.

The following paragraphs apply to the Guidelines on Mystery Shopping.

MSPA Guidelines are binding on members, and any sub-contractors employed or used by members, where they indicate that actions or procedures *shall* or *must* be adhered to by members. Breaches of these conditions will be treated as breaches of the Code and may be subject to disciplinary action, including potential exclusion from membership of the MSPA Europe.

Recommendations within such guidelines that members *should* behave in certain ways are advisory only.

For more information about the Guidelines, please contact a member of the MSPA Europe board.

### **Definition of Mystery Shopping**

Mystery shopping can be defined as:

The use of individuals trained/briefed to experience and measure any customer service process, by acting as potential customers / actual customers and in some way reporting back on their experiences in a detailed and objective way.

## Overlaying Principles of Mystery Shopping

### **Ethical Principles**

- The objective of a mystery shopping project should be to provide management information on processes and/or quality of service, in order to aid retraining plans, improvements in service and hence increase customer satisfaction etc. Such projects must not be used as the sole reason for dismissals and reprimands.
- Any agency undertaking such work must ensure that their client is aware of the provisions made in these Guidelines and get agreement that both parties accept them as the basis for the project.
- All work must be conducted within the law of the country where the fieldwork is being conducted.
- To be ethical, the client's own staff must have been advised that their service delivery may be checked from time to time through mystery shopping. Where regulatory bodies or sub-contractors intend to use such projects to examine service levels provided, they must ensure that the contacted party understands that this method of appraisal will be used, and advise its staff accordingly. This could be in the form of a newsletter or on the company website. With competitor organisations such assurances cannot be made but the competitor staff or organisation must not suffer any detrimental effect (see section 1.2) as a result of a mystery customer research exercise.
- The validity of any study depends on the design and execution of the scenarios used. These should be:
  - relevant
  - credible
  - ethical
  - practical
  - safe for the mystery shoppers
  - and objective.
- Mystery shopping is not traditional market research but is a business information tool. Mystery shopping generally reviews how staff perform against pre-determined standards during an interaction where the staff takes the lead.

### **Technical Principles**

- To be relevant, the scenario must be designed to test the specific sales or service behaviour that is the topic of study. Think of the training or instruction that staff have been given on how to deal with a situation and come up with a scenario that, when delivered credibly, should result in staff delivering those desired actions. The study can then test the extent to which this is the case.
- To be credible, the scenario should be realistic, in that it mimics natural consumer behaviour in the market concerned and can be enacted convincingly by the mystery shopper. While mystery shoppers must be thoroughly briefed, they must not appear too slick or over-rehearsed. Overly sophisticated scenarios can result in the staff guessing that the mystery shopper is not a real customer, compromising the value of the study. As a general rule, the scenario itself should be straightforward, so the mystery shopper can easily grasp it, with the

detailed briefing focusing on how to handle follow-up questions, so providing convincing 'depth' to the role. In addition, mystery shoppers should fit the profile of appropriate purchasers, and have a level of familiarity with the product field that is appropriate to the role they are playing.

The distribution of the evaluations also needs to be credible. It could be expected that the time taken to speak to a member of staff, and possibly the service received, might be affected by the time of day, week or season when the mystery shop takes place. It is therefore important to ensure that visits and/or telephone calls are made at an appropriate spread of different times and locations, or that visits and/or telephone calls are made at the same time if the project methodology so requires (such as for bench marking).

To be practical from the evaluation viewpoint, simplicity, brevity, and keeping the assignment appropriate ensures experiences are correctly reported. It should be borne in mind that mystery shoppers have to remember their answers until they are out of sight of staff, and the check should therefore be limited in length and complexity to allow for this fact.

Whatever scenarios are used for mystery shopping, they must be safe in that the mystery shoppers are not asked to do anything illegal or that puts them under any physical risk e.g. locality, disability, gender, ethnicity. Care must be taken to protect mystery shoppers from any adverse implications of carrying out an evaluation e.g. personal safety, effect on credit references.

The questionnaire that the mystery shopper completes should be focused on objective questions, with the majority aimed at gathering factual information. The primary aim is to document precisely what happened at the point of contact, rather than how the mystery shopper feels. Objectivity will also help ensure consistency across all of the evaluations conducted. However, some subjective ratings, such as the perceived confidence of staff and the mystery shoppers overall satisfaction with the way their enquiry was handled, may be included and can be useful when interpreting the results. It is recommended however that all subjective questions are clearly defined and that the client is made aware of all the subjective elements within the questionnaire and subsequent results.

## **PART B: GUIDELINES**

### **1.1 Mystery Shopping Your Own Organisation**

#### **1.1.1 Staff Communication**

##### **Mandatory**

- All staff must be informed that their organisation is subject to, or intends to undertake, mystery shopping.
- The objectives and intended uses of the results of such surveys must be made clear to staff. If reporting is likely to be at individual branch or store level or individuals will be named or recorded by video or tape, this information must be provided (where appropriate within the boundaries of individual country legislation.)
- If bonus programs are to be based, wholly or partly, on mystery shopping programmes this must be made clear.
- Such communication can be made in employee contracts or staff handbooks or by other means directly to the staff members. Details need not be given on when exactly the review will take place, exact details of aspects to be covered, or the types of mystery shoppers to be used.

##### **Recommended but Optional**

- Informing staff of the types of elements to be covered.
- Informing staff of reporting formats and channels of communication.
- Informing staff of the basis of mystery shopper recruitment, briefing etc.
- If a pilot test is to be carried out with a small number of mystery shopping contacts before the main mystery shopping program commences, it is recommended that the relevant staff be informed. However, if this is not practical, the staff members must not be identified in the pilot test results.

#### **1.1.2 Staff Identification**

- Names of staff members or identities through video, tape etc can be revealed as long as appropriate communication as to this effect has been given (see above) and providing it is in accordance with individual country legislation. Clearance from unions or staff organisation representatives should be sought in such cases.
- Disciplinary action must not be taken only on the basis of the mystery shopping program results. The aim of mystery shopping should be to increase customer service levels and develop staff through training and motivation.

- Where videos and tape recordings of individuals are held, as much information as possible about the future use of the data must be given, in particular:
  - When they are to be used
  - To whom they are likely to be shown
  - For what purposes they are likely to be used
  - Where the data is to be kept and for how long

To protect the individuals restrictions on the future use of the data must be included in either the terms and conditions, or the contract between the researcher and the client.

### 1.1.3 **Staff Attempting to Identify Mystery shoppers**

- Staff should be made aware that 'mystery shopper spotting' is not acceptable, since there is the possibility of annoying genuine customers and bringing the project into disrepute within the organisation.
- Procedures may need to be put in place to ensure that mystery shoppers are not harassed.
- The organisation using the mystery shopping should show employees the benefits of the technique and how to use the results, to ensure that spotting mystery shoppers becomes less important.

### 1.1.4 **Commission based Staff**

When evaluating staff whose income is commission based (automotive, financial services, etc); consideration should be given to the length of time the mystery shopper will spend with the member of staff or provision of compensation for potential loss of commission.

### 1.1.5 **Website Evaluations**

Mystery shoppers must be made aware that their identity may be revealed if personal credit cards are used to make online purchases.

## 1.2 **Mystery Shopping Competitor Organisations**

There are different guidelines depending on whether a product or service is purchased at the time of the mystery shopping contact. The distinction between a purchase and a non-purchase is very important.

### **Non-purchase**

When no purchase is to be made the following points apply:

- Since staff at competitor organisations cannot be warned that mystery shopping will be taking place their identity must not be exposed either by reporting at individual

- level or by the use of recording equipment, such as videos or tapes. (See 'Legal Issues' section).
- The length of time spent with a staff member should be reasonable depending on the nature of the market and the type of enquiry. The time should be kept as short as possible and should not be seen to waste the competitor's resources in any way other than a normal customer enquiry might do.
  - The frequency of assessment of any one outlet/centre should be considered in relation to the whole organisation and particular individuals must not be targeted too frequently.

### Purchase

When a purchase is made the following points apply:

- Staff must not be identified, either by reporting at individual level or by the use of recording equipment, such as videos or tapes.
- The mystery shopper must not suffer any detrimental effect by purchasing a product or later cancelling an order that has been made (e.g. their credit referencing status).

The Guidelines vary by the type of mystery shopping contact being made. These rules apply regardless of whether a purchase is being made or not.

#### **1.2.1 Telephone Evaluations of Competitor Organisations**

- Staff members must not be identified.
- Conversations must not be tape-recorded.
- The preparation of any paperwork, by the competitor organisation, following the call should be kept to a minimum and reflect a normal transaction.
- The evaluation should not specifically require a follow-up call to be made to the mystery shopper.
- The average length of time spent actually with a staff member should reflect a normal transaction in the relevant market.
- Mystery shoppers should be made aware that their identification could be revealed if the telephone receiver has caller identification technology.

#### **1.2.2 Face to Face Evaluations of Competitor Organisations**

- Staff members must not be identified.
- Contacts must not be video taped or tape recorded. (See 'Legal Issues' section).

- The preparation of any follow-up paperwork by the competitor organisation should be kept to a minimum and reflect a normal transaction.
- The evaluation should not specifically require a follow-up call to the mystery shopper.
- The average length of time spent actually with a single staff member should reflect a normal transaction in the relevant market.
- Time spent by the mystery shopper observing or auditing does not count towards the time spent with a staff member. However this activity should not unduly disrupt the customer flow or staff member activities in any way.
- Ideally the mystery shopper should make a purchase that reflects the type of business of any given outlet e.g. petrol from a petrol station rather than a key ring.

#### 1.2.3 **Postal, Fax and E-mail Evaluations of Competitor Organisations**

- Staff members must not be identified and therefore any material copied and used as part of any report should be anonymised, e.g. forms bearing staff names, email addresses etc.
- The nature of the enquiry should not be such that an undue amount of time or effort responding will be necessary
- The enquiry should not require a long stream of replies to be necessary.

#### 1.2.4 **Website Evaluations of Competitor Organisations**

All the points raised in section 1.2 must be adhered to plus:

- Mystery shoppers must be made aware that their identity may be revealed if personal credit cards are used to make online purchases.

#### 1.3 **Regulatory and Other Bodies**

- Where regulatory bodies or sub-contractors intend to use such projects to examine service levels, they must ensure that the contracted party understands that this method of appraisal will be used, and advise staff that they might be identified during the course of the exercise.
- If these actions have not been undertaken the study must be conducted as if on a Competitor Organisation i.e. individual identities must not be exposed.
- If the contract between the 2 parties states that mystery shopping will be used by way of evaluation, staff within the organisation must be informed of

this fact. Where this has happened, any project can be conducted as if on ones own organisation.

(See preceding sections for details once decision on type has been made.)

### 1.3.1 **Quality Control**

- Mystery shoppers should be given sufficient guidelines and briefing as required by each project.
- The client and agency should agree the following:-
  - Profile of mystery shopper team
  - Briefing requirements
  - Field monitoring processes
  - Quality controls
- The validation of data should be undertaken by means of computer and logic checks plus collection of any documentation confirming the mystery shopping contact.

### 1.3.2 **Agency Responsibilities to mystery shoppers**

- It is the responsibility of the agency to ensure mystery shoppers are aware that they may be identified during the project.
- It is the responsibility of the agency to ensure mystery shoppers are aware of any risks involved in any project e.g. credit rating checks.
- It is recommended that all mystery shoppers receive payment for each project undertaken.
- It is recommended that all mystery shoppers be reimbursed for any pre-authorized purchases made as part of the mystery shopping process.
- It is recommended that the mystery shoppers be informed of the payment processes and timing, and the consequences of not performing the agreed mystery shopping contacts to the required standards, including the consequences of a 'no show' at any of the agreed mystery shopping contacts.

## **PART C: LEGAL ISSUES & MYSTERY SHOPPING**

All businesses conducting mystery shopping programs must comply with the appropriate data protection, legal, and ethical issues applicable to each country that they are conducting mystery shopping programs within.