

Man of Mystery - Part I

Contributed by Shiftless
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A Shiftless Baristo Column

Sept. 21, 2006

A first-person inside-story perspective on the mystery shopper

PART I of III Parts: I was a mystery shopper!

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Man of Mystery – Part I of III Parts: What is a mystery shopper?

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Espresso-store companies commonly contract the services of mystery shoppers, or rather, of the firms that organize, train and send mystery shoppers to perform undercover observation of the store environment.

What is a mystery shopper? How does the arrangement work? More to the point, is this something that a working baristo can do on the side for a few extra bucks?

Hold your breath no more! I can tell you – from firsthand experience. Yes, I myself, The Shiftless Baristo, have been a mystery shopper and have performed mystery-shopper assignments.

First, I must state a big caveat. So far, each and every mystery-shopping company that I have signed up with requires their agents to sign an NDA – a Non-Disclosure Agreement. Generally, these NDAs specify that the agent must not disclose that they are an agent of that company, must not reveal any client proprietary information, or reveal the identity of specific clients. I take my agreements seriously. So don't expect to read here any names or any company-specific information.

Another thing that you won't read here is a first-person account of a mystery-shopper review of an espresso shop. I have sometimes received copies of invitations to perform such studies, but to avoid a conflict of interest I have to decline any offer to mystery-shop either my employer or any direct competitor.

What I can do is tell you in general what kinds of things are commonly reviewed during a mystery-shopper assignment, and common-knowledge information about the industry such as you could find published in various places, or in your

own internet research.

Who are mystery shoppers?

I don't know. I have no contact with any other mystery shoppers. However, from the specific schedule assignments for certain jobs and other indications, I suspect that many may be part-time workers, stay-at-home spouses or people who otherwise have schedule flexibility.

Every mystery shopping company that I have looked into so far engages agents as contractors, not employees.

How does it work?

Mystery-shopping is a tool for the tracking and enforcement of standards. Like most standard efforts, it does not provide much latitude to the agent who actually performs the assignment. Generally there is a form with simple yes- no or multiple choice answers to indicate whether the store or business is meeting its standards. (In some cases I have found this frustrating, as when none of the multiple-choice answers is correct.)

Also, as the term "standards" implies, often there are quantifiable measurements to perform. One mystery-shopping company issued me a stopwatch and a disposable camera. I have turned down many offered assignments because they required that the agent own a digital camera for use on the job.

Most often, the form itself is completed over the internet, allowing fast reporting with reduced paper handling. Some but not all of the mystery-shopping companies also permit the agent to scan or photograph receipts and upload them via internet, avoiding mail delays and costs.

National store chains of various kinds seem to gravitate toward use of mystery shoppers. Standardization, for them applies not only to product and service, but also to the "look and feel" of the store.

The mystery mindset

Sorry. But I can't generalize on this one, and it is always risky to extrapolate a conclusion from a single data point (myself). Even so, I think that the common feeling among baristi that the mystery shopper is "out to get me" is misplaced. I know that it is not true when I go on a mystery-shop job.

I just follow the instructions for the job and try to be inconspicuous because a mystery shopper is not supposed to be noticed. (Sometimes, there are "revealed shops" but mostly not.) I'm not out to "get" anyone, and I feel good about awarding high marks when they are deserved.

The shopper gets two things, usually, out of an assignment. First, they get paid for doing it. Second, generally they get reimbursed for small items that they bought during their store visit. All together, this is usually only a small amount of money even counting the value of the freebie. Any one small-purchase assignment is not going to be that important to a mystery shopper, but in the aggregate, I think that most shoppers (at least if they are like me) will want to do a good job so that they can continue getting their free stuff.

They are not against you. They are for themselves, but you are not their enemy.

I will delve further into the economics in Part II of this series.

What do they look for and how do they grade it?

The cardinal rule is that appearance counts for a lot. I have performed mystery-shopping assignments in at least six different industries and for multiple different mystery-shopping companies, and every single assignment instructs the mystery shopper to look around and assess the cleanliness and appearance of the business. This does not only apply to retail but to absolutely everything, inside and outside the store. If you think that the parking lot that your employer's landlord supposedly cleans does not impact your mystery-shopping scores, think again!

The lesson that I take from this, as a baristo, is that the view from the other side of the serving counter is really important. Whenever I am working at my baristo job, I try to get out from behind the counter frequently, many times per shift, no matter what my nominal task is to scan for debris, pick up customers' messes, and straighten up the retail displays.

Why do they care about neatness? I don't know, exactly; but folks in retail (not my employer) have told me that they will do anything to encourage customers to stay in the store longer. They know that the likelihood of sale, and the average sale size, increases with the length of customer visit. This is one reason, I suppose, why the Barnes & NobleTM and BordersTM bookstores of the world all seem to have given up bookshelf space for espresso bars. If a customer finishes Chapter 1 over a latte, more likely they will buy it and take it home than if they only read the first paragraph standing in the aisle.

An important aspect of store appearance is worker appearance. Maybe your employer's dress code seems like a pain, and maybe even your local store management gives the workers a break about it. That does not mean that national headquarters will give you a break! When they work with the independent contracting firms that hire the actual shoppers,

headquarters is likely to require visual checks according to headquarters's view of the dress code. The headquarters view may well be stricter than your manager's.

As an example, I have done repeated mystery-shopping jobs for one retail chain which insists not only that the employee wear approved clothing but that the shirt must be tucked in. I don't remember now how many otherwise neat-looking workers I had to mark down as not meeting code because they had not tucked in their shirts, but that was part of the standard, so those workers got dinged.

Timeliness is also extremely important. Even before I got my stopwatch, I noted many mystery assignments which required either a stopwatch, watch with a second hand, etc. to be used when timing service times right down to the second. Some assignments track only the wait-in-line time (i.e. in a store, time to get to the register). Others track the post-register wait-for-service time. Others track both. There are variations. I wish I were at liberty to tell you the details since they would be illuminating, but I will have to generalize: one mystery assignment required me to time how long an industry standard dispensing machine took to deliver a set amount of product, and the mystery-shop company actually called me to double check that I really meant it when I reported that the machine was one second outside of its acceptable specification range.

Improve service to improve your score

As I said, I have not done any espresso-shop assignments (nor will I); but applying what I know about mystery shoppers and their measurement techniques, I look for habits that I can form that can shave fractions of a second off my drink-prep time. I perform tasks in different order depending on the volume level that the store is receiving, for example. Really, I find it an aesthetic as well as practical challenge. It goes beyond standard espresso-store training to achieve a sort of Zen-like state which not only produces drinks at an optimal rate but continues, even at the most hectic level, to greet each customer with a smile and a thank-you.

Product quality, for industries where the worker can affect it, is commonly measured. Here some of the review may be more subjective — taste, or texture. Depending on the assignment, food temperature may be a concern. Don't assume that only your side of the counter has a thermometer!

Beyond all of that, clients (the national store chains, usually) will focus on specific aspects of their product standards for a while and then go on to something else. I can only guess how this would apply in an espresso bar, but I have seen restaurant reviews where they will ask about whether the lettuce on a hamburger is crisp or whether any of the French fries have spilled out of the envelope.

The wise barista will be sure that she knows what her employer's standards are and follow them. You won't know in advance what particular aspects are being scrutinized, so just follow them all — not just what the dress code requires, but also how to wear it; not just what goes into the drink, but even how to make it. Who knows? "Shaken, not stirred" might not be just from the Bond movies.

I wouldn't bother trying to identify your mystery shoppers. Just treat every customer and every drink with high regard and maintain your high standards, and you will never go too far wrong.

In Part II, I will consider whether it makes economic sense for a barista to work on the side as a mystery shopper. In Part III, I will interview a contact from a mystery-shopping company and provide lists of mystery shopping companies, in case any other baristi are interested in taking this up.

- Shiftless