
Man of Mystery – part 2 of 3: Does Mystery Shopping Pay?

Contributed by Shiftless
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A Shiftless Baristo Column

Is mystery shopping worth the trouble? Should a working barista take up mystery shopping on the side? What are the pluses and minuses?

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In Part 1 of this series, I recalled some of my personal experiences as a mystery shopper and drew some conclusions from that about how to be a better baristo.

This section delves into the economics. Is it worth the trouble? Should a working barista take up mystery shopping on the side? What are the pluses and minuses?

To work through this I need to explain a bit about how a mystery shopper goes about doing their assignment.

Once you have researched some mystery shopping companies, and selected one or more to register with as a shopper, you have to actually sign up. In some cases this can take more time than you think. For example, some services might require you to accept payment electronically, which might mean getting an account such as a PayPal account set up for this purpose.

Besides registering for the mystery-shopping company, you may also be required to qualify for a specific client shopping program. For example, you may be required to take some online training and answer a set of questions correctly in order to be certified as being ready to perform a mystery shopping assignment.

Doing the prep is important, even for assignments that you have already done before. Some ongoing programs change certain parameters from time to time, for example, the way service is timed, or specific items that you are supposed to look for on the assignment.

Consequently, you can't just do the prep once unless you only do the assignment once.

In my experience, a lot of shopping assignments are small value – perhaps \$5 to \$10 in pay plus perhaps a reimbursement of something that you bought. The total value in your pocket might thus end up as \$10 to \$15.

But to earn that \$10 to \$15 you probably spent 20 minutes reviewing your prep package or training (or 30 to 45 minutes for the first-time read-through), 5 minutes printing out the questionnaire (which they often insist you carry in your car even though you have to enter the data online), 20 minutes driving back and forth from the shopping location and perhaps 15 minutes in the store making your observations. On top of that, entering your data into the online forms wil likely take another 15 minutes or more.

So you have spent a minimum of an hour and a quarter to get that \$10 to 15. But if you bought something that you did not really want to get anyway, the reimbursement portion is less valuable to you.

Net: small ticket shopping assignments pay you, per hour, roughly what you earn as a baristo anyway. It might be easier to just work a few more hours at the shop when you feel like it.

Some small ticket items are things that “everybody” needs, though, and you may as well do them if you have to buy the item sooner or later anyway. You could end up with items like fast food meals, or batteries, or reimbursed movie rentals, or a tank of gas. Do a half dozen different things like this once a month each and your annual earned pocket money (or reimbursement for something you would buy anyway) could approach a thousand bucks.

I don’t see how someone could come anywhere near making a living at this while doing it on the side.

I have heard that more focused mystery shoppers – those who do it as their main work, or at least a more major source of income, have many tips and tricks to improve their productivity. For example, they might sign up to do the same “shop” in many locations on the same day. This means they only need to review the training once and then execute it over and over again while it is fresh in their minds. Then they plan their driving route to minimize the mileage and time spent between the assignments. This approach can maximize the effective pay per hour spent, however, the downside is that the goods that you buy might not be of value to you in quantity. Just imagine buying 20 fast-food drive-through meals in the same day (“Supersize me,” anyone?)

There are also large ticket shopping assignments, however. For example, I have taken an assignment to go shopping for cars. (No, I did not get reimbursed for buying one. In my dreams!). That particular assignment had me shop several dealerships and file separate reports for each. I figured at the time that I spent 4 hours on it in total and they paid me well over \$100, a very nice hourly rate compared to pulling espresso shots.

Other medium to large ticket assignments can come up if you have particular skill. For example, I know someone who

quite by chance came across a testing organization that I think of as the "sniff testers". The sniff testers were flagging down shoppers in a shopping mall and asking them to take a survey and get paid a nominal amount to give their opinion on a new fragrance.

So the person I know gladly took their \$5 for 5 minutes work, and then she found out that she could sign up for repeat work. As it turns out, the consumer aroma research company is in an out of the way, inconvenient industrial park. Since they do most of their testing during business hours, a lot of candidates are just not available when they need testing done. Because of the skimpy pool of sniffer talent, my smell-testing contact gets paid \$25 per "nose job" as she puts it – and each time she can get there, do the sniff test, fill out any forms they require, get paid and get home in an hour. \$25 an hour for a no-commitment, no-risk and minimal paperwork process.

In considering the financial value of doing mystery shopping jobs, be sure to keep really good thorough records. If you itemize on your taxes, then all of your auto mileage to and from a shopping job becomes a business expense and deductible. If you schedule your shopping jobs wisely, such as planning to do a shop near your work location just after or before a scheduled shift, then you can transform a commute that you had to do anyway into a deductible business expense. On top of that your home computer becomes a business tool too since you file shopper reports online.

Somehow, I have never found a mystery shopping company that ever invited me to do high end restaurant reviews, although I have signed up with over a dozen shopping firms and get opportunities from at least some of them every day. Too bad – I would love to get paid to have a \$100 meal sometime. I have been invited to do hotel or casino mystery shops but did not do any – it would only make sense to do that if it was a trip that I wanted to take anyway. Otherwise it would take a whole day (or night) to complete the assignment and they weren't paying enough for a day of my life.

All in all, then, Shiftless says – do the kind of mystery shopping that you want to do. Life is too short to go chasing a few bucks buying stuff you don't need or shopping stores that don't actually interest you in real life. If you can get paid to shop goods that you want anyway, then go for it. If you do too much of the same thing, it becomes rote and drives all the joy out of it.

You can also learn a lot about retail, or food service, or other businesses by looking at what the program asks you to measure. I have considered it a mini-education for me as I have seen just how many different businesses harp on things like conformity to the dress code, and maintaining very clean facilities, etc. Give it a try and you too can get paid to learn how to run a shop better.