



An Eye Somewhere Out There

by Hazel Chung

Stepping out from a boutique with several bags and a long receipt in one hand, Carol immediately turns off her hidden voice recorder in her other hand and starts contemplating how she should write the detailed report this time.

Carol, who refuses to disclose her full name, became a part-time mystery shopper half a year ago out of curiosity. The job entails going to a shop and “testing” the service standards. Carol can manage to conduct an average of 20 such operations every month.

The young “office lady” says the job does not require any specific education level, special qualification, or any working experience.

Since different jobs require different kinds of shoppers, her

boss at the mystery shopper agency will select the most suitable candidate for each one.

In Carol’s case, she is always assigned to check a certain boutique chain and never needs to disguise herself because she already looks the part. “The boss will usually choose someone who looks like the specific kind of customers in the real world,” says Carol.

Although anyone can apply to be a mystery shopper, doing the job professionally is not as easy as it might seem. A certain degree of subterfuge is involved.

Shoppers have to hide their true identity from everyone, not just the shopkeepers they are monitoring, but also their families and friends sometimes. “I only tell them I am doing marketing research,” says Carol – which explains why she will only give her first name.

In order to effectively measure the service standard, Carol gets training before she goes on an on-site shopping expedition. “We have to get familiar

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with the assessment criteria and the questions we need to ask on the visit, so that we can write proper and detailed reports afterwards,” she explains.

Despite all the hard work, Carol found the job interesting and full of satisfaction after just a few visits. This is especially true when she has to check the same shop again and finds its service has improved. It makes her feel she has succeeded in fulfilling her duty.

Apart from this sense of achievement, being a mystery shopper can actually benefit the shoppers in other ways.

Eric Kwan, a sales promoter and a part-time mystery shopper for two years, agrees that the job offers more than monetary returns. “I am working in the retail industry too. Assessing a shop as a mystery shopper is like looking into a mirror. It helps me to improve my own service attitude.”

Besides, Kwan says being a mystery shopper is a very challenging job which requires good observation and communication skills. They have to act like ordinary customers, but they also have to ask a list of questions about the products and assess the shop’s staff and environment.

Some may think that mystery shoppers have to use whatever means necessary to enrage the shopkeepers, that they throw clothes everywhere and make unreasonable complaints all the time. The truth could not be more different.

“Actually, the difficult thing is how to ask questions like an ordinary customer, without raising any



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Eric Kwan, a part-time mystery shopper, explains what they need to be aware of when carrying out an operation.

suspicious. I think being natural is the key to this job,” Kwan explains.

It is not just the mystery shoppers who have to be highly alert in this spying game. Shopkeepers who are being monitored also want to identify the mystery shoppers. This is where the pressure starts.

Selina Wong is a shopkeeper at a chain café outlet. She does not like the scheme though she says it is useful in improving service quality.

The chain’s managerial staff visit Wong’s workplace regularly to check on the service but Wong thinks this is ineffective. “We work harder only when the manager comes, which lasts only for an hour or two,” she says.

However, when the mystery shopper scheme was first introduced, she recalls that it made her and her colleagues quite anxious.

“It makes me nervous all the time because I don’t know when my

performance will be reported,” she says. For instance, sometimes she begins to suspect customers if she sees them clutching papers.

“However, we realised that it is quite difficult to single out the mystery shoppers. Later on, we decided to give up,” says Wong.

Another shop worker who felt anxious at the beginning is Amy, a promoter from a large clothing store who has now discovered the positive side of the mystery shopper scheme.

Amy welcomes the scheme as a channel through which she can demonstrate her good performance to her boss. Amy says her boss used to assess staff performance through sales figures, but now there is another way to judge their efforts.

However, Amy’s company does not rely solely on mystery shoppers to maintain the highest service quality. It also seeks to encourage its employees with monetary rewards and internal supervision.

“The branch manager will pick the best staff every month and offer them cash awards,” says Amy. She adds that this scheme is more direct and effective as cash rewards provide a greater incentive to work hard.

But while it makes sense for companies to use different methods to enhance service quality, at least one market research specialist believes mystery shoppers remain the most professional one.

Alvin Lau Hon-fai is the manager of MPEG (HK) Limited, a market research company that provides a wide range of mystery shopper services. Lau says

even the questionnaires are tailor-made according to a company’s requirements.

This means mystery shoppers must get training before every new operation. “For example,” says Lau, “some companies teach their staff to give certain answers when they encounter certain kinds of questions. Mystery shoppers have to know what those answers should be in advance. Sometimes we even have role-plays.”

Lau explains that most of the mystery shoppers work part-time. “We seldom employ full-time mystery shoppers. The more they go for visits, the higher chance they have of being recognised,” he says.



The company also monitors the mystery shoppers by checking their tape recordings. “It is impossible to make up a visit,” says Lau. Occasionally there is even “spying” reminiscent of the movie *Infernal Affairs*. “We arrange for one mystery shopper to check another. Sometimes the spy could be the supervisor of the shop.”

Lau explains that being careful about the assessment is vital because the result can greatly affect the shops and shopkeepers.



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Mystery shoppers sometimes even have to try on clothes.



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Anyone in a shop could be a mystery shopper.

“Sometimes the shopkeeper might be punished because of our reports,” says Lau, but he adds: “The purpose of the mystery shopper programme is not to find excuses to sack employees. We just want to discover any problems in their service and make improvements.”

Another typical impression of mystery shoppers is that their jobs are “enjoyable” because they are paid to buy, shop and dine using other people’s money.

“But we have to return the things we bought, except for what we’ve eaten.”

According to Simon, an experienced part-time mystery shopper, shoppers can claim the money back afterwards if they have had to pay upfront as long as they have

kept the receipt. “But we have to return the things we bought, except for what we’ve eaten,” Simon laughs.

As for how much mystery shoppers make, Simon says payments are based on the nature of the job and vary widely. For checking service quality in the sale of more expensive items such as luxury watches or second-hand cars, payment can reach HK\$400 to HK\$500 per visit. But for ordinary fast food shops or boutiques, the payment will drop to HK\$100 a visit.

Payment also varies according to the requirements of the company. Simon says a visit normally lasts for just 20 to 30 minutes, but if a shop requires them to check on a specific item or shopkeeper, they may need more time. If that is the case, more money will be paid.

However, he says the money is never the main attraction for most mystery shoppers who stay on the job. Simon believes that his job is helping Hong Kong’s tourism and retail development in the long term. “The ultimate target of this job is to improve the customer service of Hong Kong as a whole,” he says. ■