

Mystery Shops: Waste of Time or Key to Driving Guest Loyalty?

Les Utley, General Manager, Heathman Hotel

The Heathman Hotel in Kirkland has a credo that service is still an art when it comes to treating visitors like royalty. In late 2008, they set out to align that art with a proven science of performance metrics to raise the bar even higher.

For this luxury boutique hotel, the greatest challenge was to find a quantifiable methodology for achieving consistent, replicable improvement in guest satisfaction scores. To accomplish this, they chose a two-pronged strategy that would establish a baseline from guest survey results; this would then be juxtaposed against quarterly mystery shop evaluations.

To ensure survey response rates would be high enough to yield valid results, The Heathman selected UniFocus' GUESTScope™, scientifically designed to distill the most critically important issues surrounding the guest experience and generate monthly analytical reports. For mystery evaluations they chose SERVICEScope®, specifically developed to work in conjunction with an on-going guest feedback program.

The Value of Quarterly Mystery Shops

Although mystery shops have sometimes been controversial due to disputed findings and the idea that it represents only "a moment in time," the importance of third-party observation is undeniable. Historically the real issue with mystery shops is its misapplication and infrequency of use, which often negate the validity of the results. The Heathman therefore decided on a quarterly approach.

During the next 20 months, The Heathman was able to achieve a measurable improvement in guest satisfaction scores of 2% after each mystery evaluation. They were also able to demonstrate that this improvement had a direct impact upon a guest's intent to recommend them as a place to stay.

One reason that quarterly mystery shops are more valuable is because the hotel can easily track improvement in guest scores month by month. And there is a direct relationship between mystery shop results and guest surveys; they go hand in hand, providing the tools to measurably drive guest satisfaction and keeping the information in front of the team at all times.



Mystery Shops Drive Continuous Improvement

The process for disseminating survey and mystery shop results begins by discussing issues in department meetings and breaking it down with line staff. From what is learned from the reports, standards or policy may be rewritten; specific training takes place to ensure service delivery meets or exceeds expectations. And there is no time to coast; as soon as everyone is through with the 60-90 day cycle, then it's time to hit it again.

Ultimately this process benefits both guests and associates. The snapshot provides the opportunity to address issues with managers, identify and correct deficiencies, and recognize outstanding performance. As a result, staff members have been very supportive.

Cumulative, Sustainable Improvement in Guest Satisfaction



Since The Heathman began doing quarterly mystery shops, there has been a cumulative, sustainable uptick in guest satisfaction scores afterwards. These trend lines indicate that the upscale hotel is able to take action based upon mystery shop evaluations and guest feedback reports, then see actual improvements by tracking guest satisfaction scores after remediation or specific training to refine the service delivery experience.

As the result of the hotel's guest feedback-mystery shop initiative, their scores are consistently higher than their comp set in all areas. Whether it's the facilities, hiring, commitment of line staff or service levels, they continue to get high monthly survey scores; and though typically it's more difficult, they're getting higher scores in the mystery shops as well.

Conclusion

The Heathman Hotel has demonstrated that their approach has yielded a consistent, short-term improvement in guest satisfaction after each mystery evaluation, due to management's intervention and their utilization of the data. The combination of quarterly mystery shop evaluations with a scientifically designed guest survey system delivers quantifiable benefits.

Making connections between satisfaction scores and research from impartial observations provides a multidimensional point of view—enabling hoteliers to understand guests better, see the service experience through their eyes and know whether standards are in sync with guest perceptions.

Les Utley is general manager for The Heathman Hotel in Kirkland, a 91-room luxury hotel that includes the 5,000-square-foot Penterra Spa, 3,000 square feet of meeting space, a 2,077-square-foot ballroom, and personal concierge for customized service.

A hotelier since 1982, Utley has lived in San Antonio, Texas; New York City; St. Louis, Missouri and as far away as South Korea while working for the Ritz-Carlton Hotels & Resorts.