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# How Quarterly Mystery Shops Help Diagnose Problems...

...And improve guest satisfaction scores.

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Historically, service-based industries such as retail and hospitality have utilized mystery shoppers to help them diagnose problems—since the importance of third-party observation is undeniable. However, mystery shops at times have been controversial because of the belief that they only represent “a snapshot in time” and because of disputed findings due to internal bias.

Other typical problems with stand-alone mystery shops are the infrequency of use and its inconsistency and misapplication, all of which may undermine the legitimacy of the outcomes and even lead to misdiagnosis. The Heathman Hotel in Kirkland, with the help of outside expertise from UniFocus, chose a more refined methodology; its approach utilized a quarterly mystery shop evaluation combined with an ongoing guest survey system.

The strategy was to first establish a baseline from guest survey satisfaction scores; this baseline then would be compared with quarterly mystery shop evaluations and analyzed.

To ensure survey response rates would be statistically high enough, The Heathman chose a system —GUESTScope—that was developed to obtain valid sample sizes, “bubble up” the most critical issues from guests, and generate monthly analytical reports. The other system it chose was SERVICEScope for mystery evaluations and designed to work alongside a guest feedback program. Both systems were created by UniFocus and are industry standards.

## The Impact of Quarterly Mystery Shops on Guest Satisfaction

Once the systems were in place, and the hotel team began implementing actions based on the findings, The Heathman saw quantifiable improvement in guest satisfaction scores by 2 percent and a continuous pattern of higher scores after each mystery shop over the course of a 20-month period. There also has been an improvement in guests’ intent to recommend the property to others.

The improvement in guest satisfaction scores is most noteworthy after corrective actions or targeted training has taken place to raise the level of service delivery. There is, therefore, a connection between guest survey and mystery shop results; they concurrently provide the tools to improve guest satisfaction and make sure results are always communicated to the team.

## Communication with Staff is Key to Success

Sharing information from survey and mystery shop results with the line staff is the most important part of the process. It starts with the discussion of the most critical items in departmental meetings, a review of guest and mystery evaluator comments, and finally breaking down the data. Based upon those conversations, any deficiencies are identified and action items are created. During this time,

outstanding performance among the team members also is recognized.

Nothing is off limits during this process. For example, from what is gleaned from the reports, policy or standards may be revised. And training is more targeted to ensure service delivery meets or exceeds the standards going forward.

As soon as everyone is finished with the 60- to 90 day cycle, the process begins all over again.

The Heathman Hotel has shown that by utilizing mystery shops more frequently and linking these results to guest satisfaction scores, it was able to get an exact read of what's really going on with its guests and staff. More importantly, it avoided the tendency to self-diagnose problems because of the internal bias and conflicts that may arise from stand-alone mystery shops.

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

When organizations make connections between satisfaction scores and research from impartial observations, they get a multidimensional point of view—enabling them to understand their customers better, see the service experience through their eyes, and know whether standards are in sync with the customer's expectations and perceptions.

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