

ESOMAR Guidelines – Mystery Shopping

Introduction

The purpose of mystery shopping studies is to help focus the attention of business management on customer service improvement by providing information on the operations and the quality of service it is providing.

Mystery shopping studies can comprise the simple factual observation of points of sale or services focusing particularly on signage, cleanliness, waiting time, response time, commercial signage, the state of equipment in use, adherence to the company's standards etc. It might also extend as far as making a purchase or enquiry, where the evaluator acts as if he or she was an actual or potential customer, on the basis of a simple or more complicated scenario.

Mystery shopping studies involve the use of mystery shoppers who are trained and/or briefed to observe, experience and measure any customer service process by acting as a prospective customer and undertaking a series of pre-determined tasks to assess performance against specific criteria, reporting back on their experiences in a comparable and consistent way

Mystery shopping may cover:

- the client's own organisation,
- intermediate agents (retailers/ distributors, independent financial consultants/ advisors etc),
- competitors.

Mystery shopping techniques used may include:

- mystery observation,
- mystery visits,
- mystery telephone calls,
- mystery mail or fax,
- mystery email/ website visits.

Basic Considerations

A key characteristic of mystery shopping studies is that the data subjects are normally not aware at the time that they are participating in a study since their awareness of this might lead to atypical behaviour which would invalidate the findings of the study.

Provided that they are carried out professionally and with the appropriate safeguards for data subjects' rights, mystery shopping studies are a valid and legitimate activity.

Researchers carrying out mystery shopping studies must take every care to ensure as far as possible that individual privacy is respected and that data subjects will not be disadvantaged or harmed as a result of this work.

Mystery shopping studies must always conform to applicable data protection legislation. There must be adequate security arrangements in place both at the client and at the research company level to ensure that any personal data are secure and not accessible by unauthorised parties.

In all cases it is essential to observe any applicable legislation and jurisdiction which may govern the ways in which a particular mystery shopping technique (eg telephone or e-mail contact) may be used.

Mystery shopping studies which would be used as a method of boosting product distribution or sales by creating an apparent consumer demand for a product or a service must not be undertaken. Nor must the findings of mystery shopping studies be used for the purposes of disciplining or otherwise disadvantaging individuals involved in the study.

Two different types of studies may be carried out under the general term of mystery shopping studies. In the first type the data subjects' anonymity will be safeguarded, and all personal data collected will be treated as fully confidential and used only for research purposes. In the second type such anonymity is not provided because the data will be used to approach the data subjects individually for purposes other than scientific research. Different legal provisions may be applied to both types of mystery shopping studies.

In cases where any personal data collected are to be treated as fully confidential and are not to be used for any purposes other than scientific research the study falls under the definition of market research and can be described as mystery shopping research.

If the personal data collected are not to be treated as fully confidential and may also be used for purposes other than scientific research – for example in connection with staff training, reinforcement of sales efforts or the operation of a bonus system – then the study does not fall exclusively under the definition of market research and must not be described as mystery shopping research but as a mystery shopping project.

Whatever scenarios are used for mystery shopping studies they must be safe in that the mystery shoppers are not asked to anything which is illegal or puts them under any physical risk or threatens their personal safety eg as a result of locality, disability, gender, ethnicity. Care must be taken to protect mystery shoppers from any adverse implications of carrying out an evaluation such as possible effects on their personal credit references.

General Requirements for Mystery Shopping Studies

Researchers have to conform to the following general requirements when carrying out mystery shopping studies. These apply both to studies which are to be qualified as mystery shopping research as well as to studies which are not to be qualified as such.

(a) When carrying out mystery shopping studies on the client's own organisation the client must have notified the staff concerned previously and also any relevant staff organization (works council etc). Notification must include:

- that this activity will take place within a future time period,
- what the objectives and general nature of the study are,
- whether data subjects will be identified or not,
- whether audio, video, electronic or other recording of observations or interviews will be carried out (including adequate information regarding purpose, recipients and storage of the recording)

- if consideration will be given to making good any losses of salary resulting from time spent in dealing with mystery shoppers (in cases where staff remuneration to any extent depends on commission or bonuses)

(b) Mystery shopping studies on the client's own organisation must always be carried out in a transparent manner. The client shall be made aware of any time and other operational costs involved in the study and agree to these in advance.

(c) The client's agents or authorised distributors (as well as any organisations which are responsible to a compliance authority) should be treated in the same way as the client's own organisation providing that they have a similar direct relationship with the client or compliance authority. The staff should in particular, be given similar information as if they were working for the client's own organisation. However where there is no formal relationship of this kind then such organisations should be treated in the same way as competitors' or other organisations.

(d) In the case of mystery shopping studies on competitors' or other organisations it is important that the time and other demands created by such an activity are reasonable and kept to a minimum level. Mystery shopping studies on competitors' or other organisations must therefore only be conducted if it can be assumed that no substantial disadvantage will result from this for the persons observed or interviewed or for their organisation. This applies in particular to self-employed people or professional people etc, where time spent on an interview may literally cost them (lost) money.

(e) In situations where no purchase of a product or service is made the length of times spent should be reasonable in relation to the nature of the market and the type of inquiry. The time should be kept as short as possible and should not waste the data subjects' resources in any way other than a normal customer inquiry might do. The acceptable length of time which should be spent with members of staff may be determined by local practice.

(f) If the mystery shopping study is one where part of the evaluation involves some follow-up work by the organisation called on (eg provision of a brochure etc), this should also be kept to a minimum.

(g) If the mystery shopping study involves making a booking or reservation, or asking for provision of any other follow-up service or action which does not form part of the main mystery shopping task, this should be cancelled or withdrawn as soon as possible after completing the interview.

(h) Adequate security measures must be in place to insure against unauthorised processing, loss and destruction or damage of the collected data.

(i) Recordings shall not be retained for longer than is necessary for the original purpose of the mystery shopping study. Disclosure of recordings to the client or other third parties shall only be made with the consent of the data subjects and used for the agreed purposes only.

Additional Requirements for Mystery Shopping Research

In addition to the above general requirements researchers have to conform to the following additional requirements when carrying out studies which are to be qualified as mystery shopping research:

- (a) The individual data subjects must not be revealed or be identifiable.
- (b) The interviews must not be recorded electronically or by other means if this could endanger the anonymity of data subjects and if it is impossible to obtain their agreement to this.
- (c) If the client receives a list of the places (stores etc) used for the observations or interviews, the results must be given in a form only which does not lead to the identification of an individual person.
- (d) However, if the identity of individual data subjects might possibly become known to the client because there is only one relevant staff member at the point where a mystery shopping observation or visit is known to have been carried out or the day and hour of observation or visit as set by the client means that this may be discoverable the study must not be described as mystery shopping research.

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ESOMAR
Vondelstraat 172
1054 GV AMSTERDAM
The Netherlands
Tel: +31-20-664 2141
Fax: +31-20-664 2922