



Mystery Shopping Providers Association Mystery Shopper Q&A

What is mystery shopping?

Mystery shopping is the practice of using educated, experienced shoppers to anonymously evaluate customer service, operations, merchandising, product quality and other elements of the consumer's experience. Mystery shoppers receive instructions that outline the specific details to look for while conducting an evaluation.

Mystery shoppers are objective and provide a snapshot of the consumer experience, using facts rather than opinions when evaluating service. The shoppers follow a questionnaire with criteria developed by a mystery shopping provider and its customer.

In general, companies use mystery shopping to understand and improve the typical customer experience at each location and throughout the organization.

Who can be a mystery shopper?

Men and women of all ages and all backgrounds are mystery shoppers – from college students and people between professions to retirees or people looking to earn a little extra money on the side.

The most important attributes for mystery shoppers to possess include integrity and reliability, attention to detail, exceptional recall of observations, good follow-through on commitments and a strong ability to write.

How should someone sign up to become a mystery shopper?

As a starting point, people interested in becoming a mystery shopper should visit the Shopper section of the MSPA Web site to search for opportunities in their area and register with mystery shopping providers.

The MSPA does not hire mystery shoppers directly, but it does post current opportunities on its Web site. Visit www.mysteryshop.org/shoppers to search for opportunities in your area.

The MSPA recommends the following tips to anyone interested in becoming a mystery shopper:

- Respond directly to the companies that post the assignments (not to MSPA).

- Sign up with as many companies as you can. Most successful mystery shoppers work with several companies at a time.
- Be patient. It takes time, sometimes months or even longer, to be contacted with an offer to conduct a mystery shopping assignment.
- Once you are assigned a shop, ensure that you conduct it according to the guidelines set forth by the mystery shopping client. Shoppers who do a good job have a much higher likelihood of being invited back for future assignments.

Please note: MSPA companies will never charge you to become a shopper; it is against the MSPA's Code of Ethics. If you come across a company that asks you to pay, decline and move on to the next company.

Do mystery shoppers need certification?

Mystery shoppers are *not required* to have any certification.

However, the MSPA offers mystery shoppers two levels of certification to train them in the essentials of mystery shopping and make them more marketable to mystery shopping companies. The MSPA established its certification programs at the request of members, who wanted to better serve their clients by having industry-standard education, practices and qualifications for mystery shoppers.

Silver Certification requires a shopper to complete a Web-based educational program and successfully pass a test at the conclusion of the program.

Once Silver-certified, a shopper is eligible for Gold Certification. Gold Certification workshops are one-day, onsite seminars held in approximately 25 major cities throughout the United States each year. At the end of the seminar, a test is administered and those shoppers who pass the test are awarded Gold Certification.

Learn more about the MSPA's Silver and Gold Certification by visiting <http://www.mysteryshop.org/shoppers/certification.php>.

How much can someone realistically expect to earn as a mystery shopper?

Compensation for mystery shopping significantly varies depending on a number of factors, including the type of industry, the level of difficulty required to complete the assignment and the detail required by the mystery shoppers.

Compensation for the typical shop ranges from \$5 to \$20. Some complex assignments, such as video mystery shops, can pay \$75 or more.

It is hard to find out more specifics on which companies get mystery shopped and how much shoppers are paid because shoppers are not allowed to divulge specific information, such as the name of the company they've shopped or how much they make per assignment. The shoppers are required to sign confidentiality agreements at the request of the mystery shopping providers and their customers.

What kinds of companies use mystery shoppers?

Companies that use mystery shopping include restaurants, retail stores, hotels and resorts, banks and financial service providers, hospitals and physician offices, apartment leasing offices, grocery and convenience stores, automotive service facilities, seasonal retailers, computer/electronics retailers, mobile communications companies, luxury products retailers, home builders, self-storage facilities and more.

What tasks are mystery shoppers expected to perform?

Every mystery shopping job is different and might require the shopper to look for certain things or ask certain questions during the evaluation. Prior to the shop, mystery shoppers are given instructions detailing what they must look for during a shop and which questions they need to ask. Following the shop, mystery shoppers are required to fill out an evaluation about their experience. Questions on the evaluation could include:

- Did an associate greet you when you entered the store?
- How long did you wait to be served?
- Did the associate suggest an extended warranty with your new electronic gadget or offer to open a credit card?
- Could the associate tell you where to find a particular product?
- Was the correct promotional information displayed? Did employees mention the promotion/correctly answer questions about it?

How many mystery shoppers are there?

Because most active mystery shoppers are registered with more than one mystery shopping company, it is difficult to get an accurate assessment of how many mystery shoppers are conducting evaluations. The MSPA estimates there are more than 1 million mystery shoppers in the United States alone.

How many mystery shopping opportunities are there?

The MSPA commissioned a study in 2005 to quantify the mystery shopping market. The MSPA estimates there are more than 10 million shops being conducted in the United States each year, based on the data gathered in a 2005 study.

The study conservatively estimated the U.S. mystery shopping industry at \$600 million and growing. The MSPA estimates the value of the U.S. mystery shopping industry today at more than \$800 million, based on the data gathered in the 2005 study.

How can someone know if a mystery shopping opportunity is legitimate?

The MSPA has seen an increasing number of shopping-related scams. It's important to remember that someone should never have to pay a fee to become a mystery shopper and most mystery shopping jobs pay a nominal fee. If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

All MSPA member companies are legitimate mystery shopping companies, as the MSPA requires its members to follow a strict code of ethics that prohibits them from charging shoppers a fee or misleading them on mystery shopping job opportunities. A list of MSPA member companies is available on the MSPA Web site.

Common shopping-related scams include being charged a fee to find mystery shopping opportunities or receiving an unsolicited cashier's check and being asked to wire the money, usually to an off-shore account. If you are skeptical of a mystery shopping offer, check the MSPA Web site to see if the company is a member of the MSPA. Some scam companies mirror the names of legitimate mystery shopping companies, so you should also verify that the contact information on the materials you received is the same as the contact information posted on the MSPA Web site.

If you are a victim of a shopping-related scam, you should report it to your local authorities and to the FBI.

If you are a member of the media interested in learning more about what it takes to be a mystery shopper or in talking to a mystery shopper, please visit www.mysteryshop.org/searchmspa/search.php to find a provider in your area who can help with your request.

If you are interested in becoming a mystery shopper, please visit www.mysteryshop.org/shoppers to look for opportunities in your area.