

The Active Consumer

Going Undercover: Modern Mystery Shoppers Tell It Like It Is

(NAPSA)—Waiting in line at a local fast food chain, he checks his stopwatch. When he arrives at the counter, he listens for the proper greeting.

He checks his watch again as he waits for his food. He'll check out the bathroom on the way out to see if it is clean.

He's not a store manager, not a visiting executive. He's an actor from Denver, Colorado, working his day job as a Shop'n Chek mystery shopper.

Thousands of people across the country are being paid to shop, to buy groceries, to eat out, to buy gas. Why? Because big brands want to know what's really going on in their stores.

More and more people are going undercover as mystery shoppers in their local stores and restaurants to report on everything from customer service to cleanliness, posing as average customers.

Most people choose mystery shopping as a kind of hobby that pays.

"I thought it would be a good pastime," says Jackie Poggi, a four-year Shop'n Chek mystery shopper.

Michael Wetzlich, a six-year mystery shopping veteran, says he picked it up for the supplemental income. "I wanted some extra cash."

For most mystery shoppers, it's more than the money. Many like the ability to do it on their own time, select their own assignments and choose how many hours they mystery shop.

"One of the things I really like about this is the flexibility to work up to 20-25 hours a week or none at all," says Joe Wilson.



Mystery shoppers help improve stores and restaurants for everyone.

Some also enjoy the detective aspect of it and some like to make stores a better place to visit.

"I don't do this for the money," Poggi says. "I do it to improve the stores I visit as a shopper. This is my way of saying, hey, here's how to better yourself for the customer."

These shoppers agree that it takes a certain kind of person. Although it's easy, it's important to be observant, to pay attention to detail and, says Poggi, to "be a people person." Details matter and every industry cares about different things. That's what makes being a mystery shopper interesting and engaging.

"The QSRs [quick serve restaurants], for example, care a lot about how much time everything takes," says Wetzlich.

In the end, most mystery shoppers feel like they are making a real impact for the average consumer.

Mystery shoppers help companies improve on the experience and service they deliver to their customers in an often visible way.

"I think that 99 percent of the public who receives bad service

will not tell anyone," says Wilson.

"There is this one restaurant... I love their key lime pie," says Shop'n Chek mystery shopper Maryellen Boissonnault. "I thought the slices of pie were too small for the cost, so I mentioned it in my report. The next time I went into that restaurant, the slices were noticeably bigger!"

As the industry grows, many people are taking advantage of the allure of mystery shopping.

There are currently dozens of mystery shopping scams afloat, imitating legitimate mystery shopping companies.

These scams usually request fees from shoppers signing up. But there are ways for shoppers to protect themselves.

"I only sign up for companies I find on the Mystery Shopping Providers Association Web site, mysteryshop.org," said Boissonnault. "The No. 1 rule," Wilson adds: "If asked for money, walk away. You should never have to pay any money at all to be a mystery shopper."

Despite the recent scams, mystery shopping appeals to more people every year and their everyday work is constantly improving the shopping experience in new ways for future customers.

"It's fun, it's interesting, and I do think we make a difference," says Poggi. "I really enjoy it," says Boissonnault. "I get to eat for free at my two favorite restaurants. You get to explore places you've never been and where you'd never normally go."

If you're interested in becoming a Shop'n Chek mystery shopper, please visit <http://undercover.applyshopnchek.com>.