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What do you need to consider when choosing a Mystery Shopping company?

The selection of a mystery shopping provider will depend on the agency's ability to develop and complete a mystery shopping programme that measures and helps to improve your company performance in line with company objectives.

Some of the factors that are important to your selection decision are described below.

1. Experience

A company's experience conducting mystery shopping in your industry is very important. A company that already knows your industry, or has operated in a similar sector, may be in a better position to serve you than a company that will have to learn as it develops during the mystery shopping programme. Hence it is important to do some research to understand the company's track record to date. The company should be able to provide samples of research conducted, to demonstrate the measurements put in place, what results they can provide and the format they are provided in. The company's website may also contain testimonials from their current clients, which will help you understand the depth of their experience.

2. Understanding & Matching your requirements

A mystery shopping company should demonstrate a real ability to understand your requirements and short term and long term goals as a company; and the mystery shopping programme should always be designed with those in mind. Measurements need to be set within a mystery shopping programme which reflect the client's core service expectations. Some mystery shopping companies offer the prospective client a pilot programme. This is a useful, inexpensive tool in determining the effectiveness of the measurements.

3. Methodology

A reputable mystery shopping company should be able to outline exactly how they intend matching your requirements within the mystery shopping programme. It is important to understand what methodology the agency proposes to adopt, so ask them questions regarding how the questionnaire is developed, how they recruit and train their shoppers, how their shopper quality control system works, what scenarios are being used when conducting the evaluations and how much of their work is outsourced, if any.

4. Using Findings

From the outset, it is very important for a mystery shopping agency to discuss with their client issues such as:

- Intended use of the mystery shopping reports at all levels within the organisation
- How results will be communicated to staff
- Will results be tied into a staff incentive/recognition scheme – staff bonuses & rewards etc

- Links established with the Training Department to ensure the training programme runs in tandem with mystery shopping, and how training programmes can be developed to ensure continuous improvement.

These are important issues that need to be discussed with clients before the measurement programme commences. The more information a mystery shopping company knows about your company and how the findings will be employed, the more effective the research programme will be.

5. Reporting system

Modern mystery shopping companies now employ advanced Internet technology. These systems allow each client access to secure internet based mystery shopping reporting 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Online mystery shopping systems such as **PANnet** offer a wide range of comprehensive reporting options. This has been a very significant development within the industry over the last few years and if you are choosing a mystery shopping provider, you should ensure to choose one who uses online technology. It is very important that you have access to results quickly and at the touch of a button.

6. Deadlines

Mystery shopping reports are time sensitive, so the sooner the client gets the reports after the evaluations are completed, the better. Hence you should ensure that the mystery shopping company can provide precise timelines regarding when the mystery shopping programme will be completed.

7. Quality

The mystery shopping company should demonstrate that they are dedicated to producing quality work and have an established quality control system in place. Reputable mystery shopping companies adopt a very thorough approach to recruiting the best shoppers. These companies should always ensure to train each individual shopper by telephone or face to face on each mystery shopping programme. Some companies cut corners by just sending shoppers guidelines to inform them what to do and then let them go and complete the evaluations. Also a reputable mystery shopping company should ensure that all reports are thoroughly checked before they are sent to the client. Detailed accurate and coherent customer comments should be provided that describe what occurred during the mystery shop.

8. Shopper Network

The mystery shopping company should have access to a large nationwide database of experienced and profiled mystery shoppers. Agencies should be capable of matching mystery shoppers to their client's typical customers profile.

It is very important for your company to choose a dedicated and experienced mystery shopping company who can work with you to help deliver the optimum customer experience.

Making the right choice can result in fundamental improvements to service and sales delivery.

For more information, or a free quotation, please contact Adrian at (01) 299 3800 or email abushnell@panresearch.ie