



The Mystery Shopper Magazine

Guide to

**Route Shopping
For Mystery Shoppers**

Build your business.

Earn more money.

Travel.

James Bond 007.5

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Introduction5

Route Shopping: Is It Right For Me?8

How Many Shops You Can Complete In One Day 12

Planning an Efficient Route 14

Asking for a Bonus..... 16

A Real World Example 18

How To Minimize The Effects of Murphy’s Law 20

Planning A Two to Four Day Route 22

Software to Plan a Route..... 25

Introduction

This e-book is a short guide to route shopping for mystery shoppers. If you've never considered route shopping, this book will help you decide whether it is worth it for you, and how to succeed.

Route shopping is, in its essence, a very simple idea. You complete a "route" of mystery shopping assignments in a single day, or even several days. Why would anyone do this? You get to travel and earn more money per day. In practice, this simple idea can be hard work.

Our goal with this ebook is to make it easier for you. Here is a little bit of what we'll cover:

- How to Know if Route Shopping is for Me?
- Planning an Efficient Route
- How to Determine How Many Shops to do in One Day?
- Shopping for One Company Versus Shopping for Multiple Companies
- Asking for a Bonus for Travel
- What to do When Things Go Wrong
- Real World Examples

By strict definition, any time you leave home to do a shop, you're on a route. For purposes of this discussion, we will consider routes to be of three basic types: single day, two to four day, and trips of a week or more.

During this discussion, we're going to keep things as general as possible for three reasons. First, we don't want to get so detailed that we risk possibly violating our Independent Contractor Agreements (ICAs). Second, as independent contractors, we each have our business model. Lastly, we each have different financial goals and costs.

Let's start with a simple example. The ABC Mystery Shopping Company (MSC) has a shop they need done 100 miles from your home. The shop pays \$15, and they are offering a \$25 bonus. Your vehicle gets 25mpg on the highway and gas costs \$4/gallon. Just the fuel cost for the trip is \$32 (200 miles / 25mpg = 8 gallons * \$4). This figure doesn't include any wear and tear allowance or anything for the value of your time.

While a new shopper "might" take this shop on the basis that they are coming out \$8 ahead (\$15 fee + \$25 bonus = \$40 - 32 gas cost = \$8 profit), experienced shoppers will ask the MSC for time to search the job boards so they can build a route. Assuming this is a hard to fill shop, the MSC will, if possible, work with you so you have the opportunity to have a profitable day.

You get online and start searching the job boards. Your search yields four more potential shops in towns between your home and the initial shop. You contact the MSC's involved and are able to negotiate and average price of \$40 per shop (including both the fee and bonus) to help cover your travel costs..

You now have the \$40 from the initial shop plus \$160 (4 shops @ \$40 each) or \$200 for the 200-mile round trip. Your fuel cost is still \$32, so after subtracting your fuel, you'll have \$168.

How long will the shops take? You have roughly 4 hours of driving (200 miles / 50 mph). Let's say each shop takes 30 minutes, that's 2.5 hours, so you have 6.5 hours invested before any reporting. Let's also assume these are easy reports of 20 minutes each, so there's 100 minutes or 1.6 hours of reporting. You have a total of 8.1 hours invested, so your \$168 comes out to \$20.74 per hour. [BTW, the IRS will give you a mileage allowance of 56.0 cents per mile for 2014, so they are allowing you \$112 to operate your car for this trip. That includes all maintenance, oil changes, tires, etc.]

You've decided the numbers work for you. How do you arrange the shops? On an out and back route like this, virtually everyone would agree to start the shop at the point furthest from home and work your way back home. That way if something unexpected comes up and you don't have time for the last shop, you will have a short drive tomorrow to make it up.

The most important thing to take away from this is to know your numbers. Know what your basic costs are. After all, if you're serious about mystery shopping, you will want to make a profit.

Route Shopping: Is It Right For Me?

Routes are a way for a shopper to optimize his or her time. A route could be as simple as three or four shops across town or as complex as a 10-day road trip for one or two mystery shopping companies (MSCs) with a few extra shops thrown in to fill gaps. For the purpose of this discussion, we're going to consider routes to be at least overnight, or longer.

Another assumption in this book is that the shopper is interested in making a profit; in other words, the shopper is treating this as a business, rather than a hobby.

The first qualifying question you need to ask yourself is can you afford to be away from home for an extended period of time. You need to honestly evaluate your family commitments, household maintenance needs, and any other personal variables.

Next is lodging along the route. While experienced road warriors might piggyback hotel shops with the route shops, I would not advise new shoppers to try this. Hotel shops tend to go fast and most will require a serious amount of observations. On the other hand, do sign up for the hotel loyalty programs. The points will add up and the free rooms can be used for vacations or maybe a free night along a route. Shoppers can also add the hotel credit cards to increase the speed at which points add up.

Although we don't like to talk about it, some hotels do have bedbug problems. You can check your lodging at the bedbug registry site: www.bedbugregistry.com.

Also, don't overlook independent hotels. Earlier this year I had a three day route of shops that was centered roughly 90 miles from home. I did a search of my favorite chain, and they didn't have a hotel at this particular location. I then searched other chains and was disappointed by the reported issues at the various properties [rooms not clean, excessive noise at all hours, non-responsive management, etc.]. I decided to throw caution to the wind and booked an independent hotel through Priceline.com. I was extremely surprised. I

had a clean, comfortable room for \$60/night. Yes, the hotel was showing its age, but the owner was upgrading the rooms. Perhaps most important, although not on this trip, was Wi-Fi upload speeds in excess of 3mbps [important for video shoppers]. Also, before I left, the owner gave me a card with an account number. Now, if I need to stay there, I call direct and get the same room for \$45/night. As the owner said, "I'd rather give the money to a repeat customer than give it to Priceline."

Possibly the best piece of advice is to go ahead and plan out your stops for each night. Pick a couple of hotels and use your favorite rating sites to determine which would be best for you. At the same time, pick a couple of alternate stops, one that's not as far as you plan to get and the other in the area of your next stop, and do the same searches for hotels. Now you have flexibility. If your shops go slower than planned, you're set so you don't have to have an exceptionally long night. You also have a location in case your shops go quicker than planned, and you're able to get further down the road.

If your trip takes you through multiple states, gasbuddy.com is a good site to at least research relative gas prices. For example, my home state has an unusually low gas tax. I always make sure to fill the tank before I cross the state line.

As I continually stress throughout this book, you need to know your numbers. Know your gas mileage; know the rough distances to nearby cities. With experience, you'll soon be able to estimate how long shops will take. Knowing how long shops will take is one of the most important factors, if not the most important, when it comes to planning a route. This will be discussed in detail in a later installment.

Routes can help a shopper maximize their profits. They do have additional costs associated with them. Knowing those costs will make the difference between a route being profitable and being a drain on your resources.

Routes for One Vs. Multiple Companies

When you do a route, you have the option of doing shops for one company, or for multiple companies. How do you decide which to do? Having done both, I'll share my experiences, and the pros and cons as I see them.

One of my early routes was a 10-day excursion through South Georgia and Florida. I had been shopping for about nine months at this time. The majority of the shops on the route were for two MSCs [about 75%]. One was for car shops and the other was for senior living facilities. The remaining 25% was an assortment of other shops that I added to the mix for a bit of variety.

The 25% of "odd shops" were nice. They kept the days interesting. Most days were either car shops or senior living shops, with an odd shop thrown in. There was one day where I had one senior care shop, two car shops, and four of the odd shops. To help make it even more interesting, or confusing, I was traveling from Tallahassee to Pensacola, then back to Fort Walton Beach, Florida, throwing the time zone change from Eastern to Central into the mix. I didn't bother changing my watch or clock as the next day I was back in the Eastern Time Zone.

I averaged a comfortable four to five shops a day. I call it "comfortable" only in the sense of being able to keep track of which shop is which when doing shops for multiple companies.

I learned two valuable lessons after the fact...I didn't know about travel bonuses, and didn't know to ask for them. While it hurt to discover that I lost potential travel income that would have added to the bottom line, it was part of the learning curve that any mystery shopper encounters. The second lesson I learned was to always try the non-video version of a shop before doing the video version. I had a "baptism by fire" with the senior living shops as I had never done any before plunging into this route.

Doing a route for one company is, in my opinion, a totally different experience. I have a route of shops that I do for a regional bank two or three times a year. Depending on how I schedule the route, I can have as many as 60 on a three day trip, with as many as 25 shops in one day. While it may sound daunting, it's actually relatively easy. Each shop averages 10-15 minutes and most of the time each day is spent traveling. The key to being able to do 25 shops in one day is the fact that all the shops are the same. I make up a cheat sheet with the basics for each shop—gender, ethnicity, height, eye and hair color, and glasses. I then have a long column for notes where I will scribble key words to identify problem areas. If I see notes, I also know to listen to the DVR recording of the shop.

Route shopping isn't for everyone, but, if it is for you, it can be a way to maximize your income as a shopper.

How Many Shops You Can Complete In One Day

So you've decided to take the plunge into route shopping and are getting your shops lined up. How many shops can you complete in one day? The answer to that question will be the determining factor in how long your route will take. So what factors go into determining the length of a shop?

The easiest factor is your particular history with these shops. For example, I know that a Toyota shop will last about 90 minutes, while a Porsche shop will generally come in at under an hour. Apartment shops generally run about 45 minutes for me. Again, it comes to knowing your numbers, knowing how long a particular kind of shop will take you to complete. I recently was offered a route of a dozen shops of a type I had never done before. The scheduler told me the shops should take anywhere from five to 30 minutes. As I planned the route, I decided to allow 20 minutes for each shop. I added additional shops to fill out the route, some were home shops [60-90 minutes], a recorded college shop which the scheduler said to allow 90 minutes, a couple of Porsche shops [60 minutes each].

At this point, I used Streets and Trips to optimize my stops, as well as to plan the route so I could see if there were any areas where I might be leaving something on the table. I found a couple of areas where I felt I could pick up several shops to increase the route's profitability. I did that and it made the trip even more worthwhile.

I then started adding the duration of each shop to the calculations. It turned out that I could do the route in two days, assuming everything went like clockwork. I found a hotel shop along the route that would do a reimbursement plus a modest payment and the reporting was not extensive. This shop was two hours from home. I added it and extended the length of the shop one day. That gave me the "padding" I needed to feel comfortable with any contingencies.

So how many shops can I do in one day? It varies depending on the route, the length of the shops, how close the shops are to each other, etc. I have a favorite bank that I shop and I've done as many as 18 of their locations in one day. To a shopper starting out on a route, I would suggest allowing the maximum time for each of your shops. As you get more comfortable with routes, you can start figuring closer and closer to the actual time the shops will take.

Even experienced shoppers will still pad their routes. They may not put a cushion in each day but perhaps every third day, just in case they've fallen behind, they can catch up, or if they haven't fallen behind, they have either the luxury of a short day or the opportunity to get ahead on their route.

Mystery shopping is such a personal business that it becomes difficult, if not impossible for one shopper to tell another what will work for them. All we can do is share what works for us and you can harvest the wheat and discard the waste.

Planning an Efficient Route

Efficiency is one of the keys to successful route shopping. Making the most efficient use of your time may possibly be more important than the per shop fee. Sounds strange? Perhaps an example can clear things up.

Route one is 600 miles over three days. It consists of 30 bank shops that pay \$15 each, with a \$2 bonus per shop or \$510 total.

You're on the road two nights at \$70/night (\$140).

You average 25 mpg so there's 24 gallons of gas at \$3.75, or \$90.

Your net before food is \$280 or \$9.33 per shop.

Route two is also 600 miles over three days. Lodging and fuel are still \$140 and \$90 respectively.

The shops are 15 traditional apartment shops at \$40 each for \$600 total, or \$370 before food, or \$24.66 per shop.

At this point, personal preference enters into the equation. You know the bank reports will only take about 15 minutes each and there is minimal observation required. The apartment shop reports will take about an hour each and require a lot of observations.

Route one has a total of 7.5 hours of reporting.

Route two's reporting time is 15 hours.

Is the extra 7.5 hours of reporting time worth the extra \$90?

Only you can answer that question. For me, the answer is no, especially if I feel I can earn more than \$90 in the day I would spend filling out reports.

Another aspect of route planning is traveling to the beginning of the route. Again, this has no “correct” answer as it will depend on your preferences. Your first shop is 300-miles from home. Do you get up six hours early and drive to that shop, or do you bite the bullet and arrive the day before, spend the night in a hotel, and hit the ground running the next day, relaxed and refreshed? For me, the limit is about 150 miles, or 2.5 to 3 hours of traveling. Anything further and the numbers need to support another hotel night for me to do the route.

There are free tools to help a shopper plan a route. Mapquest and Google Maps are two online sources. If you prefer an offline source, Microsoft Streets and Trips is a good choice and my personal favorite. I use it not only to plan and print my route, but also to give me the cost estimates for the trip (time, miles, fuel used, and fuel cost).

GPS, one of a shopper’s best friends, isn’t a substitute for a good set of maps. I joined AAA to do a few shops. I then went to my local AAA office and got maps for the states within a roughly 500-mile radius of my home. Those maps never, ever leave the car. Another source of free maps, if you have the time, is the state travel and tourism office. You can email a request through their website and, depending on their efficiency, two to six weeks later you’ll have your maps.

As I’ve said throughout this series, “know your numbers” and, by adding a small percentage a “fudge factor” for each route, you won’t come out behind on the one occasion when Murphy rears his head and you have to detour, whether it be a few blocks or 100 miles.

Asking for a Bonus

Asking for a bonus is one of the hardest things for a new shopper to get used to doing. It doesn't matter if it's distance pay for Trendsourc or money to help cover expenses on a multi-day route, shoppers, especially when they're new, have a hard time asking for additional money.

As I've said before in this series, you need to know your numbers. This is an instance where, by knowing those numbers, you can determine how much to ask for and not have it be a wild guess, but rather a logically thought out reimbursement.

Let's start with one of the simpler reimbursement requests, distance pay with Trendsourc. When you look on their website, they give you a guideline as to what to ask for given a certain mileage range. If you stay in that range, and can justify it, you stand a reasonable chance of being given the shop. I've occasionally asked for something above the guideline, especially when there is road construction or heavy traffic conditions involved. Sometimes I get it, sometimes I don't.

When I do my bank route for one MSC, I generally ask for a bonus per shop. I use Microsoft's Streets and Trips to determine how many miles I'll be driving and the fuel cost, as well as something for wear and tear on the car. I figure lodging as \$75 per night [depending on time of year, because my home state has a very high percentage of tourists]. I then divide that total by the number of shops and ask for that amount per shop. Usually I'm within the MSC's range, which I discovered on my first route with them when the scheduler said, "I can offer you \$X per shop if you'll take the route." I don't get greedy during the year because, at the end of the year, these shops carry a higher bonus to get them done and the higher bonus is well above my normal asking rate.

When it comes to doing a route for multiple MSCs, the issue of asking for a bonus to cover your travel expenses starts to get cloudy. There are shoppers who feel it is appropriate to

ask the MSC to cover the bonus represented by their percentage of the shops, i.e. if MSC A has 30% of the shops on your route, you'll ask for them to cover 30% of the travel expenses, etc. Other shoppers, a minority, feel that it is perfectly all right to ask each MSC to cover 100% of your travel expenses. Still other shoppers approach asking for a bonus as a negotiation; they will ask for more than they want, knowing the MSC will make a counter offer that they will find acceptable.

There is a discussion on www.mysteryshopforum.com about asking for a bonus. That discussion can be found here

<http://www.mysteryshopforum.com/read/2/295788/page=1>

As to which answer is right...well that depends on you. I know what I won't do, but that doesn't mean that I'm necessarily open to both the remaining options. The reason I'm not being more open here is that this is a business and I know the numbers my business needs to remain profitable.

A Real World Example

My first multi-day route was a 10-day jaunt through Georgia and Florida. It proved to be quite a learning experience as it was a combination of traditional and video shops, and I took this having only three video shops under my belt. As they say on Dragnet, the story you are about to read is true. The names have been changed to protect the innocent.

Oh, and I had also invested \$800 in a PV-500 EVO2 with extended length battery and high definition button camera. And Murphy was against me at the time of this purchase. Measure was out of the PV-500s, so I had to make my purchase direct from Lawmate.

The genesis for this route was in March when a company that I had done some video shops for asked me if I was interested in shopping all their auto dealers in Florida and South Georgia in April. I was interested and began booking those shops. I didn't schedule the maximum number of shops I could do per day, knowing that I would need additional shops to help my profit margin. As the MSC involved doesn't have a way to temporarily block shops while the person they made the offer to is signing up, what would have been 25 shops ended up being 15. I spoke with another MSC, and got 3 restaurant shops. The MSC understood the flexibility of my schedule, and I was given the ability to do lunch or dinner shops, and the rigid time frames were removed. I also got 9 extended care video shops with yet another MSC. I now had a route that was profitable, but I didn't stop there.

Two of the shops were in Pensacola, way down the Florida panhandle. I began checking some of my favorite MSC's and picked up another 6 shops in various towns along the panhandle. I had 33 shops to do on this route, averaging 4 per day. I had no weekend shops, so I split my route so I could spend Thursday, Friday, and the weekend with a cousin near Tampa. An added bonus, since I had a cluster of shops in the Tampa area, I was able to do those on Thursday and Friday while my cousin was working...and I saved three nights of hotel bills. IMO, free lodging always beats getting hotel points.

The “bitter” end. I had done the calculations but, being completely new to route shopping, I did not ask for a bonus for travel [although the MSC that had the car shops rarely bonuses]. I ended up with a profit for the trip of about \$700. Between the lack of having asked for a bonus, and two of the video shops being disqualified because of technical problems [the DVR quit recording on one shop and my aim was too bad on the other shop]. Suffice to say, the experience soured me on long distance routes for several months.

Lessons learned. I began reading more about route shopping on www.mysteryshopforum.com. I also invited a route shopper who was going to be in my area to come by for a homemade dinner one night. In other words, I not only learned from my mistakes, but I took the opportunity to ask questions, and I discovered where I went wrong.

Not asking for a bonus for travel was my biggest mistake. Had I been able to cover the 1850 miles of driving, even at the 56.5 cents per mile, I would have had an additional \$1,045.

I almost overscheduled at a couple of points of the trip. Unless you happen to be a Time Lord with a TARDIS, don't over schedule yourself. You'll start to worry about making up the time and getting back on track.

Did I mention about not asking for the bonus for travel? If you're into doing route shopping, then you're looking at shopping as a business, and you need to treat it as such. You're not in business for fun. You're in business to make money.

How To Minimize The Effects of Murphy's Law

The key to success in route shopping is doing the most shops for the most dollars each day. As I've previously mentioned in this book, the further out you are planning, the more uncertainty enters into your equation.

Weather is one factor, perhaps the major factor. Although you can go online and find a 10-day forecast, realistically anything past seven days is an educated guess at best. According to Steve Pfaff, Chief Meteorologist at the National Weather Service in Wilmington, NC, "Generally speaking a temperature forecast is good for five to six days into the future while a precipitation forecast is usually accurate to three or four days." Although severe storms can happen almost any time of the year, they are more prevalent in the summer months--and can happen with less warning. Winter storms can cause traffic problems lasting days. I try to avoid route shops in the winter, although I will occasionally do an overnight route to help out a scheduler.

Another factor beyond your control is traffic and highway conditions. Are you going to encounter road construction or detours that may slow you down? What about traffic accidents? These are only a couple of events that can cause your plans to go awry.

GPS isn't a replacement for maps or a highway atlas. As mentioned earlier in this book, I joined AAA so I could do some of their shops. I went by my local office to get the free maps for Georgia, Alabama, Florida, the Carolinas, Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, West Virginia, Tennessee, and Kentucky—areas that fall within a roughly 500-mile radius of home. I also picked up maps of the New England states. I have family up there, and those maps help me plan routes when I go to visit [an added benefit of shopping--treating a cousin to a lobster dinner knowing it's going to be reimbursed]. Those maps never leave the car. If there's an accident on the highway, I can look at the appropriate map and find an alternate route around the blockage, knowing that the GPS will "recalculate" the route for me.

While it's dangerous to say "always" or "never", simply because absolutes are rare, they are useful to remember as rules of thumb, also keeping in mind that there will be exceptions. For instance, I recently completed a week of route shopping in Virginia. Normally, I would have spent each night in a different location. However, after determining that the route was feasible, I looked at options and discovered that I could drive fewer miles overall [only about a 20 mile difference] if I originated all my shops out of Richmond. Having about a dozen video shops to do on this route, I found a good hotel in Richmond that had a great Wi-Fi connection, so each night I was able to get my videos for the day uploaded. I also got 4 night's worth of hotel loyalty points, so I'm well on my way to a free night.

Perhaps the most important thing to do is to communicate. Keep in touch with your scheduler. If things are starting to go wrong, let them know as early as possible. They can, and will, work with you, but they aren't mindreaders. Both of you are working towards the same goal--to be paid for the successful completion of the job[s].

I hope I haven't discouraged you from wanting to take a route. It's important to realize that you need to hope for the best but prepare for the worst. More than 90% of the time things will turn out just fine. There will be those occasions when Mr. (or Mrs.) Murphy comes calling and you need to be prepared for those times.

Planning A Two to Four Day Route

It is very important to “know your numbers.” But exactly what does that mean? It means know what your costs are to travel a given distance. Once you know your costs, you can determine the dollar amount you need to travel that difference.

Here is where some differences of opinion begin to show themselves among shoppers. Again, if you know your numbers, there will be no right or wrong answers. The numbers will prove themselves. Please also note that the numbers used in all these discussions are hypothetical and for illustrative purposes only.

Expect the unexpected when planning a multi-day route. When figuring the expenses, I look at the total mileage, add a percentage for a cushion in case I get lost, have to backtrack because of a detour, accident, construction, etc. I use my vehicle’s mpg and calculate the number of gallons of gas I’ll need. I then add a percentage to that figure. To calculate fuel cost, I go to gasbuddy.com, average three to four prices of gas in the areas I’ll be traveling, and then add five to 15 cents to the per gallon price depending on the volatility of gas prices and how they have been trending. I end up with a fuel cost number that includes a cushion for contingencies. I find this is better than trying to calculate to the exact penny.

Comfortable lodging is also important on overnight routes. The longer the route, the more difficult it becomes to determine exactly where you’ll be spending each night. If, after trying a couple of overnight routes, and you find this is something that appeals to you as a shopper, check the travel review sites, as well as register with all the hotel rewards clubs. And as one "road warrior" suggests, bring your favorite pillow from home.

On routes of under a week, I still look at the daily income and daily expenses, although I begin to give some additional weight to the trip totals in the decision making process. For example, a \$10 convenience store shop that I wouldn’t drive five miles to do around home

is a tenth of a mile off the interstate I'm traveling between shops. Yeah, I'll stop and grab it. It's like passing ten bucks on the sidewalk.

This is probably as good a time as any to stop and discuss mapping software and how it can help a shopper plan a route. Google Maps, Mapquest, and Microsoft Streets and Trips are the most popular and each shopper has their own favorite. Mine happens to be Streets and Trips. I'm able to enter my route in any order and the program will optimize the route for me. Another mouse click and I can reverse the route. It's easy for me to enter my start time each day, the estimated length of each shop, and I'll know how many I can do in a day. I can also enter the fuel cost (the default is \$3.00) and it will compute my total fuel cost for the trip. While these functions are not exclusive to Streets and Trips, it's just that, for me, they are more intuitive on the Microsoft program. One downside is that it does tend to default to main roads even when I'm working with the shortest distance. Also, this only gives me rough distances, as my GPS will usually give a slightly different route.

Timing on the routes can be a problem and can affect your flexibility on accepting certain kinds of shops, such as hotels and meals. The longer the route, the less flexibility you tend to have. This is due mainly to the time factor—the further in the future an event is, the less certainty you have on the time it will take place. As an example, let's say you have a four-day route planned. You schedule a lunch shop that can only be done between 11AM and 1PM for the third day of your trip. Things go fine on day one. On day two however, one of your shops runs twice as long as you estimated and an accident causes you to miss your last two scheduled shops. You're starting day three two shops behind and there's a good chance you'll miss the targeted window for the lunch shop. For similar reasons, shoppers tend not to schedule hotel shops when they're on longer routes.

Of course, there are exceptions. I was once offered a mid-range hotel shop in the Hilton family near Charleston, SC. The same MSC also gave me a dinner shop in the area. I accepted those shops, and then I built a route of four shops for my trip home the next day.

Generally though, unless it's an overnight trip like this, hotel shops and route shopping don't mix.

Software to Plan a Route

There are two things a route shopper needs. The first is a good record keeping system and the second is a way to efficiently plan your routes.

Every shopper should be keeping a spreadsheet, whether it's in Excel [or the Open Office equivalent], or a purchased program such as Mystery Shoppers Bible. A spreadsheet helps keep you organized and is a Godsend when tax season arrives. There are one or two in the "New Shoppers" section on www.mysteryshopforum.com. Mine is one I put together in Excel and I highlight the rows in different colors to show the status of the shop [applied, assigned, done, paid].

Of even greater importance is optimizing your travel on routes. While you can deduct your mileage [56 cents per mile as of January, 2014], you don't want to be wasting miles as that is wasted time and, as we all know, time is money.

Mapquest is an excellent online resource for route planning. My own personal preference is Microsoft Streets and Trips. If my route changes in the middle of the day, I don't have to search for a hotspot to get online with my laptop. An additional benefit is, with the optional antenna, your computer can double as a GPS receiver.

Both programs can sort your route for the shortest mileage. As a completely unscientific test, I entered one of my bank routes into both programs. This particular route has 15 branches in and around the state capital and another 15 or so branches throughout the state. Mapquest actually came out with a route that was about 20 miles longer than Streets and Trips.

What caused the difference? The basic route for both programs was home to the state capital, then a loop through cities A, B, and C, back to the capital, then home. In other words, this route looked like a lollypop. The difference is that Streets and Trips took me

around the north side of the state capital, then on to A, B, and C, then back to the capital to do the west and south side and downtown branches. Mapquest had me doing all the locations in and around the capital, before going to A, B, and C, even though I still had to pass through the capital to get home. While 20 miles isn't much, it is a gallon of gas in city driving. Oddly enough the time difference was only 15 minutes. Again, this was a completely unscientific comparison.

Obviously the choice of software is up to you, and there are numerous additional mapping programs out there. The point is, it is a tool. Find one you're comfortable with and use it to your advantage.

About the Author

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