

The
Concise Guide to
**Mystery
Shopping**

The basics of being a very
successful mystery shopper.

Mystery Shopper Magazine

The Concise Guide to Mystery Shopping

The Basics of Being a Very Successful
Mystery Shopper

Presented By
Mystery Shopper Magazine

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Introduction

Welcome to the mysterious world of mystery shopping! This book is a short guide to success as a mystery shopper. You will learn the basics of mystery shopping, read profiles of successful mystery shoppers, and learn valuable tips from over 20 highly experienced shoppers.

The mystery shopping world is large and diverse. As a mystery shopper, you may do something as simple as purchase a piece of clothing and report back about your interaction with the sales rep. Or you might go to a fast food restaurant and record speed of service, cleanliness, whether you got a smile, and more. Or you might go to a car dealership and test drive a high-end sports car.

The options for mystery shopping are nearly endless.

The goal of this book is to give you the ability to take advantage of the many possibilities of mystery shopping. You'll get a solid foundation to begin exploring your options.

Chapter one is a beginner's guide to shopping. It answers the basic questions most shoppers have when they get started.

Chapter two is all about staying organized. This is very important – both to make it easy to pay taxes, but also to make sure you get paid for all the work you do.

Chapter three features the profiles of 3 mystery shoppers. This will give you insight into what life as a mystery shopper is actually like.

Finally, we have a section of tips from other shoppers. This is a densely packed and highly useful section, full of information that every shopper should know. This is followed by a short section with links to additional resources.

Mystery Shopping 101: A Beginners Guide

Contributed by Vlade5394

What is it?

Mystery shopping is the observation of a business operation by a mystery shopper who is unknown to the employees of that business. That shopper makes designated observations which are then reported to the business. The shopper is provided compensation in the form of a fee, reimbursement for expenses, or sometimes a combination of both fee and reimbursement.

Who uses it?

Every imaginable type of business uses mystery shopping. Restaurants, banks, gas stations, and supermarkets are very common sights on the mystery shopping job boards. There are also frequent postings for car dealers, apartment complexes, and jewelry stores. Less common, but available shops are dentists, hotels, and even major league sporting venues. On the Mystery Shop Forum (<http://www.mysteryshopforum.com/>) shoppers discuss the most unusual shops including churches, gravestones, adult novelty stores, and Spanish language funeral home phone shops. How do you say, "I have to arrange a funeral?" in Spanish?

Why pay someone to observe your own business?

Businesses want anonymous, unbiased feedback to help determine how well the business is performing. This need goes well beyond basic concerns such as cleanliness and employee friendliness. It includes observations related to corporate branding, adherence to laws and company policies, employee

integrity, and even collecting data on competitors. For example, a cell phone company wants to know if the latest advertised cell phones, plans, and extras are being offered to potential purchasers. A petroleum company wants to know if promotional signage is present, current, and placed properly at gas stations. A business selling alcohol or tobacco wants to know if its employees are properly carding younger customers. A business with opportunities for employee theft such as a bar wants to know if employees are collecting money for the products or services sold. A supermarket chain wants to know the prices of products sold by its competitors. Mystery shopping, sometimes known as secret shopping, provides a look into the day-to-day operations of a business.

What do they do with the data?

With the information provided by mystery shoppers, businesses can better evaluate how the stores and employees are executing the store's brand. It shows how well employees are complying with both company policy and relevant laws and regulations. It also provides a customer perspective. All of this can help identify areas of superior performance to reinforce and encourage further at the customer service level. Thus, employees performing well should be recognized and rewarded. Areas identified as needing improvement should result in improved or refocused training of employees. The real purpose is to increase profits by running the business better. Mystery shopping can help toward that end.

There are reports of businesses using mystery shopping reports as a basis to punish or even fire employees. However, this is generally considered a poor business practice. The industry advises that mystery shopping reports be used as a part of an employee reward and incentive program.

Who shops?

There are an estimated 1.5 million mystery shoppers in the United States alone. Adults of all ages shop and come from all walks of life. Both students and retirees enjoy the flexibility of setting their own schedule. Some shop full-time while most shop part-time, sometimes while working another full-time job. Others shop only occasionally at their favorite restaurant or clothing store for a little extra money. One can even go on the road to do a series of shops spread out over a larger area. Many shoppers keep this part of their lives secret from most of their friends and family because a certain amount of discretion is required that not all can provide. However, shoppers find the Mystery Shop Forum a place to discuss mystery shopping, ask questions, and even vent about things that did not go exactly to plan. One of the forum's more well-known shoppers has detailed several of her mystery shopping adventures that include discovering a dead body in the bushes of a gas station, outrunning a love-starved goat at a zoo, and hearing the scream of an unlucky Peeping Tom after spraying hot water into a peephole of a shower. Those reports must have dropped some jaws. Many shoppers have written detailed profiles about themselves for the Mystery Shopper Magazine. Those profiles are collected here, <http://www.mysteryshoppermagazine.com/category/mystery-shopper-profiles/>. In addition, there are a growing number of interviews of shoppers who describe how they earn \$2,000.00 or more per month. Although most shoppers do not have either the opportunities or devote the time and resources to earn that much money, you can read their stories here, <http://www.mysteryshoppermagazine.com/category/interviews/>.

How does it work?

Although some businesses choose to have in-house employees perform mystery shops, the great majority will hire one of the many Mystery Shopping Providers (MSP). The MSP uses their expertise to craft a series of observations to evaluate the execution of the client business's vision. MSPs will then contract with individuals, usually as independent contractors, to perform the visits. These shoppers are instructed to take certain observations or follow a scenario at a store to buy products or services. Perhaps they will pose as an interested customer at a bank or car dealer and then back out before the purchase. After the shop a report about it will be submitted. Those reports will then be screened for correctness, consistency, grammar, and punctuation before submission to the business, also known as a client in the industry. MSPs maintain websites to solicit shoppers and provide a platform for shoppers to report shops. An exception to this general practice is in the state of Nevada. There, the law requires mystery shoppers to hold a private investigator's license or be the employee of a private investigator. Unfortunately, you can not pick up some mystery shopping jobs at a Las Vegas casino or restaurant on your next trip there without first getting a private investigator's license or becoming an employee of one.

How did it start?

Mystery shopping has its roots in the 1940s as the retail industry in the United States grew into bigger stores. They turned to anonymous shoppers to measure employee integrity. Before the internet, reports were filled out by hand or on typewriters and then mailed to the MSP. Yes, communication was by good, old-fashioned, snail mail. The advent of the internet with high

speed connections and widespread availability of computers and cell phones have allowed a rapid expansion of the industry because of the much quicker and easier methods of communication between all involved parties. A trade organization, the Mystery Shopping Providers Association (MSPA) was founded in 1998 during that expansion to protect interests of the industry. It grew and later established chapters around the world. Today the original chapter that started in the United States is known as MSPA-North America (<http://www.mspa-na.org/>). It offers shoppers education with certification courses and also links shoppers to shops with member providers. Today the United States mystery shopping industry is estimated to have at least \$1.5 billion in revenue.

Can anyone do it?

Absolutely. Any adult with access to the internet can start their own mystery shopping business. Yes, it is certainly a small business with income to report and expenses to document. Getting started requires one to sign up with MSPs. This involves going to the websites of MSPs to fill out an application. Basic information like age, address, and contact information is always required. For tax purposes MSPs will require a Social Security number or an Employee Identification Number. Many MSPs will require more detailed information such as job experience, cars owned, or banks used. This is done to better match shoppers to shops. Often, but not always, MSPs will approve new shoppers immediately or shortly after answering a confirming email. Others are more selective. Those may want a writing sample or time to evaluate the potential new shopper as a fit for their business. Once approved, shoppers can log on to the MSP website and view the job board. From there one can apply for jobs or even self-assign

them from those MSPs that allow shoppers to self-assign shops. Then the shopper becomes familiar with the instructions and observations before completing the shop. Testing is often required to ensure the shopper understands the requirements of the shop. This will vary depending on the procedures of the different MSPs.

In addition to internet access, a mystery shopping business requires other equipment. This includes a computer, printer, and scanner or camera to take images of receipts or other documents. A fax, and cell phone are also quite helpful in general. Frequently a timing device like a watch or a camera with specified resolution is required for shops.

Which companies?

Signing up with companies, or MSPs, is perhaps the most important and intimidating task for a new shopper. MSPs number in the hundreds just in the in the United States. Some are very large with shops just about everywhere. Others are smaller with fewer clients in a limited geographic area. Some are niche MSPs offering a limited number of shops in a particular industry such as banks, restaurants and hotels, or even healthcare providers. The Mystery Shopper Magazine has articles designed to help new shoppers get shops quickly and offers other advice. They can be found here, (<http://www.mysteryshoppermagazine.com/new-shoppers/>) Shoppers also find the Mystery Shop Forum and the Mystery Shopper Magazine invaluable sources of discussion and reviews. Collections of threads about and links to individual MSPs can be found on the Official List of Mystery Shopping Companies page (<http://www.mysteryshopforum.com/companies/>). Reviews of more than 100 MSPs can be found at the Mystery Shopper Magazine (<http://www.mysteryshoppermagazine.com/category/mystery->

[shopping-companies/](#)). It is also necessary to find legitimate links to legitimate MSPs because of the scams that plague the industry.

“I got a large check from a mystery shopping company with instructions to cash it as part of a job, send most of it back to the sender, and keep a portion for myself as a fee. SCAM??????”

Unfortunately, it is a scam. Scams targeting the mystery shopping industry use a version of the old Nigerian Bank scam. The scam artists will usually usually hijack the company names, executive names, and even contact information like website addresses and physical addresses of real, legitimate MSPs for use in their scams. Individuals and nearly all legitimate MSPs have found themselves victimized by scam artists in this manner. It is the secrecy that most shoppers keep with regard to their work that perhaps makes it easier for these scams to be believable to some. An enlightening article about these scams can be found in issue 102 of the Mystery Shopper Magazine

(<http://www.mysteryshoppermagazine.com/uncategorized/mystery-shopping-scams-how-to-stay-safe-as-a-mystery-shopper/>). Please link to MSPs from reputable sources like the Mystery Shop Forum or Mystery Shopper Magazine and then bookmark those for future use. The Federal Trade Commission has unbiased information on these scams. You are welcome to use the following link

(<http://www.consumer.ftc.gov/articles/0053-mystery-shopper-scams>) or Google “FTC mystery shopping.”

What is in the future?

Technology has driven the industry to this point and it certainly will continue to do so. With the days of handwritten reports and submission by snail mail gone, shoppers typically make their observations in the field, take notes on paper immediately after the shop, and later enter the reports on their computer from their home office. However, more and more shoppers are using WiFi networks, cell phones, tablets, and laptops to enter their reports in the field, just after the shop. After the wave of expansion that brought many more MSPs into the industry, recent years have seen a number of mergers and acquisitions shrink the number of MSPs somewhat. However, the number of jobs continues to increase. Video shopping has gained a foothold in the industry. The shopper uses covert video equipment to make recordings of shops. Although the required equipment is costly and requires additional skills to operate, the appeal of video shops are higher fees and less time to report the shops than traditional mystery shopping. In addition, the proliferation of smartphones and improved service networks for them have allowed the dream of a shopper going to the mall and then deciding to do a mystery shop to become reality. Apps such as Gigwalk and Field Agent have been developed that allow shoppers to search for shops, get the instructions, and complete the shop by using their cell phone or tablet in the field. Client businesses can get nearly instant feedback from such apps. This variation of the business model clearly has a place going forward. In addition, Presto Mobile (<https://insta.prestomobilesurveys.com/site/Map>) is a promising new development that combines the idea of a smartphone app with the database of a number of traditional MSPs. It could be said the future is now. Anyone for doing a shop on your Apple Watch? It just might happen.

How do I get started?

With the help of the Mystery Shop Forum and Mystery Shopper Magazine you can easily get started in your mystery shopping business.

- 1) *Sign up with companies.* Start with the five MSPs recommended in the article “Five Mystery Shopping Companies for Beginners.” (<http://www.mysteryshoppermagazine.com/mystery-shopping-companies/five-mystery-shopping-companies-for-beginners/>) When you are ready for more companies consider the top 15 most-discussed companies from the “Official List of Mystery Shopping Companies” (<http://www.mysteryshopforum.com/companies/>). Research individual companies from that list.
- 2) *Get assignments.* From the job boards of the companies you signed up for apply for or self-assign shops. The five MSPs recommended for beginners have many shops that can be self-assigned. Get details about types of assignments from the forum and Mystery Shopper Magazine. Get pointers about the MSPs and assignments on the forum.
- 3) *Complete the assignments.* Read and understand the instructions. At times it might seem you are alone, remember there are many other shoppers that have been exactly where you are at this time. Ask for help on the forum. When it is time for the shop, take a deep breath before going in. Report the observations.

What next?

By reading these words it is clear you have found this vibrant community devoted to the somewhat secretive world of mystery shopping. At the Mystery Shop Forum and Mystery Shop Magazine find out how to get more and better assignments. Discover what shoppers say about MSPs and assignments. Ask questions and share your experiences. We hope you have fun with mystery shopping. Welcome!

Setup and Organization for Mystery Shopping

Contributed by CureMS

One way to succeed in this business is to be organized. As a new shopper, you may want to know what to keep track of – and how to keep track of it.

The method below describes only one of many approaches. It can be used as is or tweaked to meet individual needs.

Save everything related to a shop.

In this day and age of technology, everything can be digitized to take up little space. If you have little space on your computer, invest in an external hard drive. The external hard drive can be filled with all your files, not just mystery shopping files. So here are the files I save and how they are organized.

- a. **Comments** – all my write-ups.
- b. **Confirmation Numbers** – copies of the confirmation numbers I receive when submitting a shop.
- c. (Shop) **Definitions** – a copy of the payment amount, any bonus emails, and the address for each shop.
- d. **Guidelines** – copy of the guidelines for each project.
- e. **Invoices** – Some companies use invoices. Copies are kept here. I also keep a copy of previous months for my master spreadsheet (discussed later).
- f. **Miscellaneous** – anything else pertaining to mystery shopping. I keep copies of the articles I submit the Mystery Shopper Magazine here.
- g. **MS Company Documentation** - Copies of Independent Contractor Agreements, applications, direct deposit statements, etc. This is the place for information that is not specific to a shop.

- h. **Pictures** – All pictures that I take for my shops.
- i. **Receipts** – Copies of all receipts.
- j. **Recordings** – Digitized copies of all voice recordings.
- k. **Training Information** – Anything that deals with training, even if just suggestions from other shoppers.
- l. **Videos** – Digitized copies of all video shops.

Create a consistent organization system.

This point deals with the naming scheme. Everything needs to be named so that it can easily be retrieved within a file. All my file names have the following format: **ShopName Location Date**. The way the date is formatted is critical. All my dates are in the format **YYYY-MMDD**. This allows for easy sorting. When using a spreadsheet, if the date is in one cell, and it is formatted as MMDDYYYY, the system will always sort first on the month. Shops usually cross years. So an example of one of my shops is “InBloom Austin 2015-0701”,

Track your shops.

I have a **Master Spreadsheet**. You can download a sample here:

<http://www.mysteryshoppermagazine.com/the-guide/sample-spreadsheet.xlsm>

You will need Microsoft Excel, or Open Office to be able to view the spreadsheet.

Many other shoppers have spreadsheets that they are willing to share also. Just ask on the [forum](#).

The first sheet of my shop lists all “open” shops. An open shop is one that I have not yet received payment for (color-coded blue), shops that are waiting for me to complete, and shops that I have requested (color coded yellow). There are various cells for each shop, too many to name here. A few of these cells are: shop name, date due, receipt amount, gas expense, reimbursement amount, fee, bonus, and more.

The second sheet is for closed shops. It lists shops that I received payment for and shops that I completed but for some reason will not receive payment. This sheet is sorted, and sub-totaled by MSC, with a master total. Shops are cut from sheet one and inserted into sheet two when they are closed.

The third sheet is for closed shops too. It lists shops that I received payment for and shops that I completed but for some reason will not receive payment. The difference is that this sheet is sorted and sub-totaled by month, with a master total. Shops are cut from sheet two and inserted into sheet three.

The fourth sheet is what I call my password sheet. It lists every MSC that I am signed up with, along with the userid, password, shopperid, and URL for that MSC.

Sheet five lists my active MSC contacts, their email, phone number, title, and MSC.

Sheet six lists my aliases. For shops where it is important to use a different alias when shopping the same MSC, I list the alias, phone number used,

MSC target, MSC, and date shopped.

Each month I archive a copy of my Master Spreadsheet into my invoice file. The new name of my Master Spreadsheet becomes Mystery Shop Summary Sheet YYYY-MM.

I had been keeping paper copies of my receipts in monthly folders. I have discontinued keeping copies of the receipts. However, I still have monthly folders. In these monthly folders, I keep copies of anything that is given to me on a shop and not digitized. This would include things such as apartment handouts, paper gifts, etc. These are destroyed every six months.

It may seem detailed, but if you spend the time setting up and customizing your files, you will find that it is easy to store and find information quickly.

Finally, many seasoned shoppers have systems that they have set up and are willing to share. If you are not adept to setting up your own shopping system, there is no need to reinvent the wheel. Check [Mystery Shop Forum](#). You can ask or search to find information on setting up a tracking system.

Profiles of Mystery Shoppers

It can be hard to really know what mystery shopping is like until you go out and complete your first assignment. Not only that, mystery shopping can fit into your life in a unique way. This section will give you a more personal view of mystery shopping – you'll learn what it's like for a few very different people.

It will show you the potential of mystery shopping and how every individual finds a unique way of fitting it into their life.

Shopper Profile: elcarev68

Written by elcarev68

In 2009 it had been ten years since I had run a marathon, so I figured I ought to check off another item on my bucket list. I still couldn't afford a Karmann Ghia convertible, so I skipped to the next item on the list: try being a secret shopper.

My first shop was a specialty salad place. The meal was delicious, the adrenaline surge of playing secret agent was a total rush, and the critical feedback from the editor conveyed warm encouragement. I tried another to prove to myself that I could ace the report, and then put a very satisfying checkmark on the list, figuring my secret agent days were done.

Two months later I was blindsided by the discovery of \$60K in previously unknown debt for which I was responsible, followed immediately by a series of major expenses, followed by several years of chronic illness in my household. Mystery shopping moved off the bucket list and onto the to-do list.

I did every shop for all eight of the mystery shopping companies that I could find. I did gas stations, fast food, retail, cars, etc. I also did a lot of merchandising. I was the balloon person for big box stores. I stocked millions of prepaid cards, and processed returns at a hardware giant. Plus, I was answering online surveys, collecting bottle cap points, collecting scrap metal... anything for a buck. All this was on top of a 60+ hour per week salaried day job.

I was barely keeping it all together when in 2013 CRI had a glitch in their computer system. Through an internet search for help in getting reports submitted, I stumbled upon Mystery Shop Forum.

That was the turning point for me. I found out there were hundreds more companies available than the eight I had found on my own, with thousands more clients. Most importantly, I learned of these wonderful things called “bonuses.” (In my first four years of MS’ing I never asked for one. Now I don’t work without one.)

I still work my 60+ hours/week day job, and probably put in 40-50 hours/week MS’ing between research, shops, and reports. In 2014, there were more devastating medical bills, and I wound up doubling my MS goal for the year by completing exactly 1,000 shops and earning \$24K in pay plus \$4K in income-equivalent reimbursements. It was only possible due to the advice shared by veteran shoppers on the Forum from whom I’ve learned to shop much, much “smarter” (meaning for me more money earned and less time expended.) I’ve learned how to let go of perfectionism in reporting, become uncomfortably hardlined in my bonus demands, organize my shopping into an actual small business, and let go of a lot of shops that I really enjoy because they don’t pay enough.

OK, that’s my narrative. Obligatory Q&A?

My favorite MSC(s)? Maritz and AMA.

My favorite shop(s)? Whatever has the highest dollars earned to time spent ratio. Trite? Perhaps, but completely true. I’ll go anywhere and do almost anything for enough pay.

My biggest self-dope slap moment? Completing and reporting at a wrong location... as in 80 miles wrong, in a town with a totally different name and on a highway with a totally different number.

My specialty? Gas stations and various integrity audits.

Shops I don't do? Fine dining, because I'd rather do three gas stations for \$100 in profit and brown bag a sandwich for supper for the same amount of time onsite, driving and reporting. Also, nearly any shop that pays less than \$20.

Most memorable shopping moment(s)? Making a higher education admissions representative cry with my backstory. Driving 150 miles just to take a photo of a bathroom door that I had forgotten. The devastation I felt watching my hidden video of a valet stealing \$1.75 in change from my ashtray, knowing he would be unemployed within days. The look on the clerk's face when I said I needed the \$1 receipt to turn in to my Probation Officer.

Top advice to shoppers? Maintain your integrity. If you schedule a shop, complete the shop. If you screw up, then fess up and don't cover up. Your word and your reputation will build your business.

Shopper Profile: CureMS

Written by CureMS

Mystery shopping for me was great from the beginning. Football season is a big deal in our household and the Papa John's pizza shops fit it well. For Saturdays, when I was out and about, there was always an MSC begging for a Sonic shopper. That was a year ago. Last month I shopped the Ritz Carlton with a requirement to order way too much food and alcohol. It was a good thing that I was required to spend the night!

I've come a long way from fast food shops, although they are still a part of my repertoire, especially when my grandchildren visit. We still do Papa Johns or maybe a fast food comparison shop. My 13 year old granddaughter has gotten so good at being my sidekick shopper that I have had to start paying her.

There are several factors that have gotten me where I am today. I **started small**. Before moving up to the higher paying shops, I learned the business. I learned what an MSC is, how to write short succinct reports (still working on that), how to put together a route, and what my limits are. I discovered and signed up with MSC's, a tedious but valuable lesson.

I learned the hard way to **memorize project guidelines**. I think that every shopper has missed a critical point in the guidelines resulting in lost or reduced pay for the project, at one time or another. So I learned to read, re-read, then read the guidelines again. And for comfort, I take a digital copy of the guidelines with me so that I can read them once more before the shop. Understanding and hitting every point in the guidelines is paramount to getting paid.

It has helped that I am a project manager by training. This has made it easy for me to **plan routes and especially time**. Time is ultra-sensitive for me since I developed Multiple Sclerosis (the other MS) about 15 years ago. Extreme fatigue and brain fog can come on in a minute, sometimes causing me to forget my route. Planned and written routes have been the only way I could have completed several shops.

Another factor is my **writing skill**. I don't mean spelling, because there are numerous spell checkers available for free. I mean the ability to put together coherent sentences and use correct grammar. Reports are sometimes difficult even with this skill. The yes/no reports are few, low paying, and far in-between.

Now I'm a numbers and computer person. I grew up with computers doing everything from programing mainframes to building and troubleshooting PC's. Never messed with a mac J. So for me it was easy to **be comfortable with computers and software**. You may be able to upload the picture of a receipt from your smartphone to your email, but if you can't upload the report, receipt, and perfectly sized pictures, in the MSC's system, you can't get paid. You must also be able to navigate different applications for different mystery shopping companies.

Over the past year I have worked to be known as **dependable** No scheduler wants to go through the process of reassigning a job and no editor wants to send emails back and forth trying to pull information from a shopper. I learned gradually how much information is too much or too little before getting it almost right. If I take a shop, I will make every effort to do it, even if lose money on it. If I am able, I will also take a twirky special

request to help out a scheduler. Schedulers seem to remember me when the juicy shops come around.

My computer knowledge has helped me to ***develop and keep accurate records***. While I believe that most people in our profession try to do their best, sometimes innocent mistakes can be made. I know that I've made maybe a half of one mistake. A few payments have gone awry and not ended up in my bank account. Accurate records on my part have helped to put those funds where they should be.

Throughout the year I have ***developed relationships*** with others in the profession. I have developed relationships with schedulers and editors in an effort to help them help me. I communicate with other shoppers. My knowledge of mystery shopping has grown ten-fold by reading the forum and the Mystery Shopper Magazine. I have received help and advice from expert shoppers as I move forward with video shopping. It has been a great comfort over the year knowing where to go to get answers to questions that I have and also answers to questions I did not know that I had!

I learned to ***daydream***, (even more). When I am at a bank in a small town 75 miles from where I live, I can daydream and say that I am shopping for a bank in the area where I am about to build my dream home, a place where I can retreat from the city. It could happen!

So for 2015 my goal is to make more and shop less. In a past Mystery Shopping Magazine I read an article where a "high income" shopper said that they steered away from "reimbursement heavy" shops and went mostly for the clear profit shops. I guess that means I have to let go of the "chocolate" shops!

Finally, in a nutshell here are the points from my first year of shopping.

- Start small.
- Memorize guidelines.
- Plan time and routes.
- Develop writing skills.
- Become comfortable with computers and software.
- Be dependable.
- Develop and keep accurate records.
- Develop relationships.

Shopper Profile: LJ

Written by LJ

How long have you been mystery shopping? I've been mystery shopping off and on for 8 years.

Where are you shopping? I started in the Tampa Bay area, but now I'm in the beautiful Willamette Valley of Oregon. I also enjoy picking up a shop or two when I travel.

What got you started? I was working full time as a police sergeant, but since my husband and I love to travel, I wanted to be able to save faster for our next cruise. When I remembered that a cousin had been a mystery shopper years ago, I thought might give it a try. I had investigated a lot of scams when I was a financial crimes detective, so I was very cautious as I began looking for legitimate opportunities.

What was your first assignment and how did it go? I chose McDonald's as my first mystery shop because I figured that would be the easiest one. I mean, who could mess up such an easy assignment, right? I was positive that I would nail it my first time out due to my superb observation and report writing ability, not to mention the communication skills I'd honed as a hostage negotiator. I confidently entered the lobby, noted the clerks name, ordered the correct sandwich, missed my timings, forgot to ask for ketchup in the drive through and threw away my lobby receipt. I had to redo the entire shop. It was a very humbling experience.

What is your favorite type of assignment? I enjoy airport shops when I have a long layover. I also get a kick out of apartment shops since I worked

as a leasing agent and apartment manager during my college years. I especially love revealed shops if I can give away a nice cash prize. I've had the clerks tear up because they needed the money so badly and I got to feel like Santa Claus

What kind of assignment haven't you tried out yet? I haven't tried a brake inspection shop, and now that I've read the comments in the Mystery Shop Forum, I don't think I will. I also haven't tried phone shops. I know it seems nice to be able to work without ever leaving the house, but I just hate talking on the phone.

What's your #1 tip for other shoppers? Avoid burn-out by not getting in a rut. Try new things – new shops, new companies, new tools, new methods, new ...whatever! The best place to learn about new things is the Mystery Shop Forum. I learned about the Presto Mobile site, Jobslinger, (thanks to MSM as well), the inside scoop about companies, video equipment, cell phone apps, and why brake inspection shops are NOT for me. The forum is THE place to be for a new mystery shopper and even seasoned shoppers can learn something new.

What's your biggest pet peeve with mystery shopping? While I don't mind long narratives, I do get tired of the report forms that require I repeat the exact same comment in three or four different places.

What's your favorite MSC? At the moment it's JM Ridgeway, but ask me again next month and it could be someone else.

MSPA certification: Silver in 2007. I can't decide if I want gold or not. I'm open for advice.

Tips for Shoppers

At mystery shopper magazine, we've profiled quite a few highly experienced mystery shoppers, asking each of them to share their number one tip for other shoppers. Here's what they had to say.

Traveliz

My number one tip to new shoppers is not to stress about the email!! It takes a millisecond to delete an email and you never know when a great opportunity is going to turn up. When I started people didn't have alternate emails so all (yes all) of my email goes to one account. Honestly though that makes it easier for me as I check one source at home and on my phone and I know if there is anything I need to apply for. Allow everyone to email you!

Itsasecret

When trying a new shop, do one shop, preferably near home, and fill out the report and get your feedback before booking more of them. They're not always quite what the job offer describes.

Miketfse

Get a voice recorder and a Google account. The voice recorder will help your memory – great for verbatim reports! It will also help measure timings. The Google account will allow you to have a separate shopping email account. With Google drive, you can keep documents online, such as shop guidelines, which allows you to reduce the amount of paper you use. You can also use the calendar to coordinate your shops. As all of this is online, it's easy to access with a smart phone and a simple data plan. It can be accessed from anywhere.

Irene_L.A.

When starting out, take all jobs in your area. Do your best to write a good report to keep your rating an 8/10. This helps in getting better jobs. Follow instructions to the letter. Remember to be professional and if you make an error, learn from it.

GraceR

Start a spreadsheet and enter every shop you do into it. Include the company, client, fee, reimbursement, and your mileage. When you get paid, mark on your spreadsheet that you've been paid for that shop.

James Bond 007.5

Don't be afraid to try a shop. Everyone has different tastes. Let me revise that, based on the comments I've read on mysteryshopforum.com, don't be

afraid to try a shop, except for Ikea. Likewise, just because someone may not like Company X, doesn't mean you won't. I always read the discussions about each company before I decide if I want to shop for them or not. If I'm not sure, I'll try one shop for a company and see what happens, then decide. I also keep a spreadsheet where I color-code the companies that I need to be cautious about. Also, everyone has to begin somewhere.

Sunnydays2

Don't take more shops that you can handle, because you can get overwhelmed. And then you start to beg for extensions, come up late on your reports or wait until the morning to do them. So just take what you can handle and save yourself from getting strike points against you.

Second Tip: If you think that submitting doing your reports late or completing them without receipts, proper documentation, descriptions, and pictures is going to be overlooked by the client, you are mistaken. You are rated on your performance. So go slow and submit proper reports to avoid getting deactivated.

ShopperBob

I have four suggestions for shoppers intent on earning money: always operate with the thought that this IS business. Next, consider video work. My lowest paying such assignment was \$50+ an oil change, but at the other end was one for \$400. Continuing, learn from the mistakes and advice of those on the Mystery Shop Forum. Last, but certainly not least, apply for route work. It need not be as a road warrior; I'm a day route shopper, but traveled 438 miles this past New Years Eve to complete 17 assignments.

57 Carol

Have fun, and to enjoy learning new things. I am not a technical person in the slightest, so getting educated on pixels, and screens and apps, etc., is pretty interesting.

Audrialyn30

I would encourage shoppers not be afraid to ask questions, especially if the guidelines are conflicting. Some times it can be intimidating to ask schedulers questions if you don't understand something. However, do it anyway. If you make a mistake, you are held responsible. Don't put your reimbursement on the line, just because you are scared to ask questions.

JPGilham

I have been on the Mystery Shop Forum for quite some time but wish I had found it before I started shopping. It's a fantastic resource and I recommend it to anyone interested in learning how to mystery shop.

TowerOrchard

Keep excellent records. You need them for taxes, plus having everything in writing helps you easily figure out which companies are slow (or no!) payers, when bonuses are likely to show up, what a company is willing to pay for a job, and a ton of other important information.

Topaz74

Be willing to do favors for schedulers, but not so many favors that you are not making money. Offer to do the shop that is 50 miles out in the middle of nowhere for the regular shop fee in exchange for some shops that have more competition close to home.

Remember that even if you make \$100 in a day, it is not necessarily worth it if you had to drive 100 miles in an SUV with gas at \$4.15 a gallon. I put probably 60,000 miles on my car in JUST mystery shopping, so I have to plan on making enough money in a few years to replace a car.

Keep detailed records and analyze your spending vs. profits frequently. Make sure you log all those miles and use them as a tax deduction as well, or you will be paying too much in taxes.

Lisa4984

The most important, and difficult, thing I have learned is to stick up for yourself because no one else will. The second thing is everything can be negotiated. I've never been in a position to negotiate my own salary or raise. I just got a huge, 3-day bonused shop thanks to the forum advice on negotiating fees.

GeauxCJ

Make sure you understand what the job entails. You know...like when you can only return the item after an hour, or can't return it at all! Another tip is to be sure you are prepared to go over budget on certain shops. With a little planning you can try to make it work, but there are some that don't cover

everything with the reimbursement they provide. Think of it as a large discount.

Michael C

Read. Not just what the MS companies tell you to read. Read the prospective client side and see what kind of promises they are making about you. Read the blogs and forums of your targets. Read the MS forums, but don't believe everything, particularly when I write it. This is a wild, unregulated industry where risk is rewarded, but there is no one for the mystery shopper to call for help. You eat what you kill.

Pammie8223

My #1 tip would be to read the guidelines *and* the report before you go out on a shop. There are times when there are things that are on the report that were not highlighted on the guidelines.

CureMS

My #1 to shoppers would be to read the guidelines thoroughly. Read them up and down and then read them again. Make sure that you have in your mind all the points that you must hit on during your shop. Also make sure that you are at ease with every point. Typically guidelines will give you suggestions as to how to approach an issue, such as using a variation of your first name instead of your real name for apartment shops. All that reading could be the difference between whether or not you get paid.

Jaymo

If you're just starting out, don't be afraid to take the low paying shops. You might lose money at first, but you're gaining valuable experience and proving yourself to the MSCs. If you do a good job on the \$5 shops, you're more likely to be offered the higher paying jobs down the road. I'm still fairly new and am paying my dues, but I am now beginning to see more (and higher paying) offers coming my way.

LJJake

Treat mystery shopping as a business, because it is. Set goals and organize and plan each day's shops to achieve them. Perhaps my # 1 tip is to set an income to expense ratio for each day's shops that will yield a minimum ratio of 2 to 1, and much more preferably 3 to 1, 4 to 1 or higher.

LJ

Avoid burn-out by not getting in a rut. Try new things – new shops, new companies, new tools, new methods, new ...whatever! The best place to learn about new things is the Mystery Shop Forum. I learned about the Presto Mobile site, Jobslinger, (thanks to MSM as well), the inside scoop about companies, video equipment, cell phone apps, and why brake inspection shops are NOT for me. The forum is THE place to be for a new mystery shopper and even seasoned shoppers can learn something new.

Tarantado

With digital storage becoming more and more affordable, it is becoming easier to store paperwork that could fill a warehouse into a USB drive that could easily fit in our pockets. From saving assignment information that lists the payment to email/text correspondence stating guideline variances, all this information should be saved.

My # 1 tip for shoppers is to save the following for every assignment:

- 1) Assignment information that lists location, date assigned and payment.
- 2) Guidelines and all related documents for this particular assignment. Never assume the guidelines were the same as the assignment you did for the same client yesterday.
- 3) E-mail correspondence or text messages that can directly affect the assignment, whether it is bonus money agreed to, guideline exceptions, etc.
- 4) Useful feedback that can help improve your shops in the future for this mystery shopping company / client.

lrjonesmshopper

Be willing to learn and set goals. Willingness is the desire to do something; which in this case, is to learn about mystery shopping. Every company is different. Every scheduler is different. Every type of shop is different. And, the shop instructions constantly change. You have to stay on top of it.

Your Next Steps

If you've read this far, you know more about mystery shopping than the average mystery shopper. Most shoppers are only aware of the few companies that they work with.

There are literally hundreds of mystery shopping companies that hire mystery shoppers.

One of the keys to success as a mystery shopper is to sign up with as many mystery shopping companies as you can.

But, that begs the question, which companies should you sign up with? And how do you find them?

There are two simple answers.

1. Subscribe to Mystery Shopper Magazine. It is a free, weekly, email magazine. Each week, we review a mystery shopping company that may be worth registering with.
2. Join Mystery Shop Forum. There is a huge database of legitimate companies, as well as a very active community of shoppers that report on the quality of each of the companies. Joining the forum will also give you access to a wealth of information – far more than could be contained in a single book.

Once you've started registering with mystery shopping companies, you'll soon be given the opportunity to complete assignments. Armed with the knowledge from this eBook, and backed up with the support of the Mystery Shop Forum community, you'll be well on your way to mystery shopping success.

Further Reading:

[Interviews with Mystery Shoppers Who earn \\$2,000+ a Month](#)

[The New Shopper Section on Mystery Shop Forum](#)

[How to Negotiate a Bonus](#)

[4 Mystery Shopping Job Boards](#)

[How Do You Do Several Shops in One Day?](#)

[Mystery Shopping Company Reviews @ Mystery Shopper Magazine](#)

[The Mystery Shop Forum Directory of Mystery Shopping Companies](#)