



Tips FOR Mystery Shoppers, FROM Mystery Shoppers

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MSPA Shopper Conferences are always a great time for Team JobSlinger. This is partly because we don't get let out of our cages very often, and for two days we get to eat something besides gruel and see this giant glowing thing in the sky called the "sun."

The main reason why conferences are so valuable to us, though, is that we get to meet and talk to so many experienced mystery shoppers. When we asked them what advice they'd give a novice mystery shopper, we got a treasure trove of valuable tips that we thought we would share with you:

What you should expect from mystery shopping

The number one piece of advice that our experienced shoppers had for new shoppers was to have reasonable expectations. That's not always easy – you've all seen those mystery shopping ads that say you can make hundreds of dollars a day, or that you can make substantial purchases and be reimbursed for them. Ever think they sounded too good to be true? Well...they are.

"Moderate' is the word," says mystery shopper Kathy Brocker. "A shopper shouldn't expect to go out and buy a multitude of clothes and jewelry and get to keep it." Likewise, typical payments for mystery shopping assignments are modest. "Mystery shopping is a nice little fun activity, but you're not going to get rich at it," said Jo-Anna Jents, a silver-certified shopper from the Chicago area.

Mystery shopping is work

That's not to say that you can't find higher-paying shops, or shops for luxury resorts, upscale restaurants, cruises and casinos. When you do, though, be prepared to work, according to our super shoppers. The higher the pay, or the nicer the perks, the more the client is going to want in return – typically, very demanding reports that take hours to complete and require a lot of detail.

For some shoppers, this defeats the purpose of a resort shop. "I really thought I wanted to do a cruise shop until I found out the amount of work involved," Kathy Brocker said. When you have to spend several hours a day working on your report, it can turn a fabulous free vacation into a working vacation, or into just plain work. You can still get a lot of fun and enjoyment out of it, but you shouldn't expect the same carefree experience as a regular customer.

Start small

On a related topic, our experienced shoppers advise that beginning shoppers start with small and simple shops. Mystery shopping is harder than it looks, and experienced shoppers can tell some hilarious stories about the mistakes they made and the lessons they learned (the hard way!) on their first shops. Schedulers know this, too, and when they have a more demanding (and thus higher-paying) shop to assign, they're unlikely to give it to a new shopper. This can be frustrating, as it seems that you can't get anything but basic, low-paying shops. Don't give up – those shops are just what you need to learn the skills of mystery shopping.

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Any mystery shop, even the most simple, requires you to observe and record details about the shopping experience. This may sound easy, but remember – you have to do this without being spotted as a mystery shopper. That's a lot harder to do with a high-end shop, where you will generally be called on to engage in more complex interactions with staff and record many more details. Entry-level shops, on the other hand, usually provide better opportunities to take notes without being observed. For example, as Jo-Anna Jents points out, a cafe shop allows you to openly take notes without being spotted as a mystery shopper. "You can sit at a corner table and write to your heart's desire," said Jents, noting that similar behavior would be more likely to attract attention in an upscale restaurant. "Or grocery shopping -- you've got to have a grocery list, and it's normal to read your list and write things down."

Simple shops also allow you to become familiar with the process of preparing and submitting reports, and help you to establish your reputation with schedulers. You may not want to do simple shops forever, but it's definitely the way to get started.

Be prepared

Speaking of reports, it's important to remember that your report is the main thing that a scheduler uses to evaluate your work as a shopper. Writing an excellent report is the best way to get a good rating from a mystery shopping company and become a preferred shopper – and in order to write an excellent report, you need to prepare for your shop. This means reading and understanding the survey. A typical survey asks some very specific questions (the name of the person who greeted you), and also some open-ended questions. It's common, for example, for a survey to follow a simple yes-no question ("Was the waiting area neat?") with a more open-ended question ("Please describe"). When reviewing the survey prior to performing the shop, don't just pay attention to the specific questions – think about how you might answer the open-ended questions, too. If you're asked if the waiting area was neat, what details would you look for to support your answer? The placement of furniture, the presence of clutter, an overfull wastebasket, coffee stains on a table surface – how many things can you notice? Use your imagination!

Once you get started mystery shopping, you may find yourself performing the same shop multiple times. While this can save you some preparation time, always verify the shop and report details beforehand, because reports can change. After you have verified the details, make yourself a "cheat sheet" with a list of what you need to observe during the shop. Also note the date and time that the shop must be performed, and make sure that you don't have schedule conflicts. Write down the shop location and know how to get there. If you need to use any special equipment, such as a digital camera, verify that it is in good working order (and that you know how to use it). These are small things, but if you fail to pay careful attention to them, sooner or later they will trip you up.

Know what you like

So, mystery shopping is work, and it ain't all free refrigerators and luxury cruises. So why do it?

"Perks," said Kathy Brocker. "They make it worthwhile." One type of shop that Brocker enjoys is theater shops. Her task as a shopper is to check the movie trailers, but when that's done, she's free to stay and watch the feature – and get reimbursed, and paid besides.

"They usually pay about \$12.50," said Brocker. "With the cost of movies today at nine bucks a shot, it's worth it. I get a free movie and I get \$12.50. I've seen every movie out there!"

Finding your niche in mystery shopping is really a matter of finding an activity that you already enjoy. If you hate shopping for clothes, then an apparel shop is probably not the best shop for you. Find something that you like to

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do – something that you would choose to do anyway, on your own time – and look for assignments that fit in with that.

Look for opportunities

Want to know how some experienced shoppers were able to attend the MSPA conference in Pittsburgh? They went searching for hotel shops in Pittsburgh! Others used JobSlinger to look for restaurant and retail jobs in the Pittsburgh area and did some assignments while they were here. That's how successful shoppers operate: they look for opportunities, and they're prepared to take advantage of them when they come.

"A successful shopper, in my opinion, would have job opportunities every day of the week, that they can take or not take," said Kathy Brocker. As the mystery shopping industry evolves, sometimes these opportunities appear in new areas. One new area of interest, which was the subject of a seminar at the MSPA conference in Pittsburgh, is medical mystery shopping. "Mystery shopping is going into the doctor's office," said Brocker. "It's a business and you want to have that return clientele. That's a relatively recent trend in mystery shopping that makes sense, and that has only been within the last couple of months."

Find the tools to help you

One of the great things about mystery shopping is that you can get into it without an investment in equipment – your most important tools are your eyes, your brain, and your power of observation. At the same time, it's hard to be organized if your main tool is hand-scribbled sticky notes. Fortunately, some of the best tools available to you are free, or cost very little money. A good desk calendar will help you keep track of your shops – or combine it with an all-in-one organizer that also has an address book and notepad. It's always a good idea to carry contact information with you on your shops, in case something goes wrong and you need to contact a scheduler.

Other tools cost more money, and you might want to consider how much use you'll get out of them. A digital camera is useful for taking pictures of receipts (particularly for retail shops where you must return an item and may not get to keep the hardcopy receipt), and required for some shops where you must take pictures. Many shoppers consider a cellphone an indispensable tool, and there are plenty of inexpensive cellphones available. For more money, you can invest in a smartphone, which duplicates the functions of an organizer or PDA. You can also get a smartphone with a web browser, email client, even a GPS to help you find your shop! Of course, these features cost more, as do the service plans needed to support them. You'll want to make sure that you can justify the additional expense before you make an investment like this.

Finally, one of the most indispensable tools for the modern shopper is the Internet. It's how reports are submitted, and (using sites like JobSlinger) how many shoppers find work. It provides you with the tools you need to research companies and get directions to shop locations. As you get started as a mystery shopper, remember that many of the most useful tools are already at your fingertips!

For more useful tips and advice, go to: <http://www.jobslinger.com/LearningCenter>

Happy Shopping!

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