



Most people imagine the mystery shopping scenario to go something like this: it's mid-afternoon on the high street, and in the local music store two young female sales assistants stand chatting, eyeing up potential boyfriends, while a woman carrying a clipboard and mobile phone waits to be served.

Eventually, one of the girls ambles along the counter, continuing the discussion with her friend, now some distance away. Unimpressed with the lack of attention the customer writes on her clipboard "female staff uninterested and need disciplining - overdressed, too much make up and skirts too short". Two weeks later the assistants are out of work and the store manager considers his market research budget well spent.

Maybe that's how it used to be but, thanks to the work of companies such as Manchester based ABA Quality Monitoring, the picture today is somewhat different.

Mystery shopping has come of age and is now a widely accepted marketing tool. It is thought that as many as 85 per cent of companies use the technique, though due to its intrinsic secrecy this statistic is difficult to confirm. That said, many are now happy to admit to using mystery shopping, perhaps seeing it as good customer relations. Dixons, Richer Sounds, Pret à Manger, and pub chain Greenalls all profess its benefits. Government departments are also catching on, and ABA was recently commissioned to carry out a review for the Employment Service.

Estimates of the UK market

Spot the mystery shopper: ABA sends members of an established team to do its undercover work, rather than using temporary staff

value vary between £11 million and £40 million, but it is clear that mystery shopping is now a mainstream activity. The mystery, however, lies only in the name, as the method and aims are very simple. Assessors go into shops and report on the quality of service they receive - what could be simpler? This provides companies with the information they require to assess their effectiveness in any given area, enabling management to make informed decisions that should lead to more effective performance throughout the organisation.

Over the last eight years, ABA has developed this concept to assist many organisations, including hi-fi retailer Richer Sounds.

One of the critical aspects of mystery shopping lies in using the information as a training method, rather than as a disciplinary tool. "Enlisting staff commitment to a more customer-orientated philosophy will help to ensure the success of a campaign that might otherwise run aground," says ABA managing director Kate Jacobsen.

"We have a different approach to many of our competitors, in that we have a team of full-time mystery shoppers - known as auditors - rather than a database of temporary workers. A smaller, dedicated team allows us much more flexibility to develop truly effective packages for our customers. It also means that we work much more closely with our team."

That team totals around 50 assessors, all of whom are carefully

Undercover investigation

Mystery Shopping has come of age, becoming a tool for staff training and customer service, rather than a blunt instrument for picking up problems. **Neil Bromage** reports

selected and rigorously interviewed. It was this stringent policy, coupled with ABA's ongoing training, that led Richer Sounds to use the company. Richer Sounds managing director David Robinson says: "A lot of mystery shopping companies seem to have a very casual approach, and you just can't guarantee the accuracy of the visits".

Mystery shopping has evolved considerably in the 10 years since Richer Sounds first adopted it. It was originally used solely to ensure that "cash was going into the till" says Robinson. The emphasis changed from staff to customers when the company recognised the "need for a mystery shopping specialist that could help us go much deeper into this area".

Enter ABA, which enabled Robinson and his company to look at the customer experience in much greater detail.

"We are doing a lot of work on

the first-time buyer experience, many of whom are women, and who we know often feel threatened and uncomfortable in our kind of shop. ABA provided exactly the right kind of people to replicate their experience," he says.

Similar reasons were also responsible for ABA's assignment to carry out a campaign for Railtrack. Monica Lucas, a partner in consulting firm Pragma, which is responsible for the Railtrack project, says: "Objective evaluation, particularly measuring service criteria, where small, well-trained teams are absolutely necessary, is one of ABA's skills".

Lucas goes on to state the importance of having very clear objectives that are outlined in the initial brief. "What we were doing with Railtrack was a unique type of study. It wasn't as customer-

focused, but instead concentrated on physical attributes of

Railtrack stations. This was further complicated by the fact that we also had to take account of matters that were not directly in Railtrack's control but in the hands of a particular service provider."

But mystery shopping does not end there. As methods of shopping become ever more diverse, the means of monitoring effectiveness have to keep pace. More and more service is now conducted over the phone and packages are available in varying degrees of sophistication to provide assessments.

ABA has taken this one stage further, utilising the Internet and its own Web site. This is already bringing international business enquiries, including commissions for projects, surveying and, among other things, an American golfing project. Around 30 applications each week from would-be mystery shoppers are also received. Customers benefit from being able to access information much more quickly and take appropriate action where needed.

Estimates of the cost of all this vary. Most companies claim that, compared to other forms of market research, it is relatively inexpensive. Naturally, the overall cost will depend greatly upon the amount and nature of the visits required by the client. As a general guide however, £25 to £50 should cover a visit and report.

If companies are genuinely seeking to nurture both customer and staff into long-term relationships, improve efficiency and optimise training costs for new staff, it is hard to find a reason not to become mysterious. ■



Through the keyhole

Discussing the brief for your mystery shopping report might involve any of the following:

- assessing whether customer requirements are being met;
- measuring the effectiveness of staff training and providing help to improve performance;
- ensuring that policies and promotions are being carried out correctly;
- checking consistency of standards across the organisation;
- obtaining information about competitors' standards, methods and procedures.