

What Your Customers Aren't Telling You

By Jim Davidson

Introduction

You can read online reviews of your store – you can ask customers to fill out surveys – but the only true way to gain store feedback? To send in a mystery shopper and visit the store like an everyday customer.

A mystery shopper looks and sounds just like a regular customer. The difference is they completes an extensive checklist after leaving the store. This article reports our mystery shopper's key findings from the grocery store we visited. The key findings are applicable to the customer experience in all retail and service environments. Moreover, grocery shopping is a common task across households.

Entering the Store

Upon entering the store, the mystery shopper and another gentleman were unable to find shopping carts close to the entrance. This was a missed opportunity for increased revenue, as the shoppers had to settle for smaller baskets. The mystery shopper commented "I never did see a cart. If they were outside, maybe I missed them since it was dark outside".

Fresh Produce

The produce department is the very first stop in the grocery store and the best chance to make a great first impression with shoppers. This was the case with our mystery shopper as they noted the fruits and vegetables were eye-catching and displayed nicely.

"However, I did buy Italian tomatoes that went bad after four days. I check tomatoes very carefully, and they did look firm and fresh [in the store]. I also bought bananas which were very nice". She also noted some plastic bag rolls were empty in the produce department.

Deli

At the deli counter, the employee appeared confused by the questions asked by our mystery shopper. The shopper purchased some Black Forest Ham and asked how long the ham would stay fresh. The employee seemed confused: "I don't know" – "maybe four days" – "maybe don't eat it after three days" were the responses.

The mystery shopper noted "Another customer, who was beside me, had a confused look on her face. I'm sure I did as well." However, throughout this exchange with the employee, they made eye contact with the mystery shopper.

Bakery

Next, our mystery shopper moved to the bakery, where she asked the employee to recommend a dessert for her diabetic father. The employee took our mystery shopper to the Weight Watcher bagels, but our mystery shopper reiterated she was looking for a dessert.

The bakery employee looked through the shelves and finally declared “we are a small store, so we don’t carry diabetic products”. The bakery employee made eye contact with the mystery shopper during this conversation.

Meat

At the meat counter, the mystery shopper was unable to get the attention of the employee working behind the counter.

Pre-Cooked

Pre-cooked meals are more popular than ever before. Despite the “grab and go” nature of these meals, customers may still have questions or look to employees for recommendations. Unfortunately, this interaction never took place during our trip to the store.

Our mystery shopper noted this - “The woman completely ignored me and another customer. She kept her head down while packing up the pre-cooked food into containers. I am sure that she would have had to heard the other lady or me.”

Customer Service Desk

Our mystery shopper was looking for shoe polish and approached the customer service desk to ask some employees for assistance.

Two young female employees were behind the counter, accompanied by another employee, and were laughing and talking together and appeared preoccupied. The mystery shopper asked where she could find shoe polish, but the employees didn’t know where to find the item. They paged another employee and he informed the customer that the store didn’t carry shoe polish.

Cashier

The checkout is the final checkpoint for the store to make a great impression upon shoppers. A negative exchange or no interaction at all with a cashier can leave a bad taste in shoppers’ mouths.

At the checkout, the cashier didn't make eye contact with the mystery shopper. The only dialogue from the cashier towards the mystery shopper was the cashier asking the customer to put the basket on the floor once it was empty.

Not only that, but the cashier didn't thank the mystery shopper for her patronage as she left the store.

Washroom

Our mystery shopper noted the washroom was clean and had sufficient supplies.

Overview

You may be surprised to learn what your customers aren't telling you. That's why we sent one of our mystery shoppers into a chain grocery store somewhere in Ontario – to get the true every day in-store experience for this article.

Had this been a visit to the grocery store for a regular customer, this would've been a missed opportunity. The lack of shopping carts was the initial hurdle in this shopping experience and it was downhill from there.

The employees in the deli, bakery and the customer service desk were not prepared to answer the questions posed by our mystery shopper.

The employees in the pre-cooked in the meat departments seemed to ignore the mystery shopper altogether. At the customer service desk, the employees were less than professional and didn't appear engaged and lacked product knowledge of the store's product lines. Lastly, the cashier was very mechanical and didn't leave a positive impression upon our mystery shopper.

We asked the mystery shopper if she would consider shopping at this store under her own volition, and her response was "no way".

With the slew of options available to the everyday shopper, your store must stand out by boosting its in-store experience. Amazon and other online providers also offer convenience to the time-sensitive shopper as well.

The key to attracting and retaining customers is consistent, quality service. Customers can get their groceries (or restaurant meal, clothing, books, haircut) from practically anywhere - why should these customers get groceries (products, services) from you?

The in-store experience, friendliness and expertise of employees can give you a competitive edge over other retailers. Why not use that edge to your advantage?