

## OPINION

# Mystery shopper services help you solve problems in all aspects of customer service

By Mistie LoNardo

If repeat business is the bread and butter of your bottom line, then your bottom line depends on how well you understand your customers' experience. How can you get "out of the box" of your own perspective and experience your restaurant like your customers do?

In its early days, mystery shopping was a little like paying people to fill out glorified feedback forms. The information gathered was too general and too shallow to be of any assistance to a manager or owner who was serious about improving the customer's experience. Thankfully, the mystery shopping industry has made tremendous advances. No longer just glorified feedback forms, mystery shopping reports now offer many insights into a customer's experience and have proven to be an important and priceless tool in the restaurant industry.

When I was the regional manager of a midsize chain of restaurants, I quickly discovered I couldn't simply trust my own

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experience. My employees were all at their best when I walked on the floor, often skewing my perspective of the customer's experience and satisfaction. Feedback forms felt out of place in my restaurants, and I suspected only problematic or exceptional events would be reported. I needed a different approach and decided to hire people to come in as customers to report their findings to me.

Suddenly, I had eyes in the back of my head. I could see problems that had been present all along. I took it a step further and taught my mystery diners to look beyond their direct experiences and observe the way the restaurant functioned as a whole. They were trained to look around and sense the other customers' experience and how they were influenced by staff interactions.

**M**ystery shopping has come of age. Evaluators can be specifically chosen and individually trained to be better representatives of a particular restaurant's customer base.

From this feedback I began to see how I could fine-tune my restaurants to increase their repeat business. Applying what I learned, our sales doubled and our costs were cut by a third.

From individually owned restaurants to small, intermediate and national chains, mystery shopping has come of age. The technology has improved to allow management to focus on various aspects of the restaurant experience. The evaluators themselves can be specifically chosen and individually trained to be better representatives of a particular restaurant's customer base.

(See **MYSTERY** on page 20)

*This article does not necessarily reflect the opinions of the editors and management at Nation's Restaurant News.*

## Side Dishes

### NAME OF THE WEEK

#### Jive Turkey

Brooklyn, N.Y.

This week's winning restaurant is located at 441 Myrtle Ave. in Brooklyn, N.Y. It specializes in deep-fried turkeys flavored with a variety of spices.

If you spot a clever, funny or bizarre restaurant name, send it to Name of the Week, Nation's Restaurant News, 425 Park Ave., New York, N.Y. 10022.

### Burger King ad campaign makes a hefty impression in Spain

MADRID, SPAIN — The Health Ministry here has issued a whopper of a complaint against Burger King.

The government agency demanded that the fast-food chain pull its ad campaign for the monster XXL burger, which is the caloric equivalent of eating 10 fried eggs, because it violates a Spanish initiative against obesity, the Associated Press reported.

The ministry asked Burger King to end the campaign because it goes against an agreement signed by the Spanish Federation of Hoteliers and Restaurateurs, of which Burger King is a member. Under the agreement, members of the federation said they would not promote huge servings of food.

Burger King's Spanish website touts the Double-Cheese Bacon XXL with a tagline saying, "It's awful being a vegetarian, right?" The website describes the burger as a

Whopper "with two enormous portions of flame-broiled meat that will give you all the energy you need to take the world by storm." By the way, the sandwich has about 971 calories and 25 grams of fat without condiments.

According to the report, Burger King's press office here said there were no plans to end the campaign and that customers could always choose to purchase a salad or could remove ingredients from the burger.

### When reading badly translated menus, seeing is believing

LONDON — Looking for a healthy portion of grilled surgeon? A restaurant in Latvia will serve it to you, but beware — grilled sturgeon is really what's for sale.

According to the Daily Mirror newspaper here, the item is one of many badly translated dishes on the menu. Another is a dessert called Pigeon's Milk, but we're not so sure what exactly that is.

The list, gathered by Travel Trade Gazette, also found this tasty treat at a restaurant in Poland: "roasted duck let loose with beef rashers beaten in the country people's fashion."

Burgers and fries, anyone?

### Restaurant skimps on shrimp; diner says no way he will pay

PALM HARBOR, FLA. — When Ralph Paul received his order of Shrimp and Scallop Verdura at Angellino's restaurant here, he

decided not to pay for the dish.

The dish, which cost \$15.99 and featured five shrimp and five scallops, was not worth the price, Paul, a retired Air Force pilot, told the St. Petersburg Times.

Citing a "code of honor," the former pilot said he complained unsuccessfully to the restaurant's management team and then decided to leave the restaurant. Unfortunately, management had other ideas and sent sheriff's deputies after Paul, who was charged with misdemeanor fraud.

Paul, who said he wouldn't be able to look at himself in the mirror if he had paid the bill or negotiated a settlement, hired a \$500-an-hour attorney in New York and was acquitted of the charges in a one-day trial.

Compiled by Elissa Elan



Each week Nation's Restaurant News asks a question, in which a restaurant features prominently in a movie. The answer appears

in the following week's issue. So all you movie buffs out there, put on your thinking caps and have some fun. Visit [www.nrn.com/reelfood](http://www.nrn.com/reelfood) to check out previous answers.

**What is the name of the film in which the main character, played by Ashley Judd, and her friend eat Krystal burgers?**

*Answer to Nov. 27 Reel Food: In "A Good Year," a trader-turned-winemaker, played by Russell Crowe, meets the girl of his dreams, a restaurateur in Provence, France.*

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# Mystery shoppers help solve customer service problems

(Continued from page 18)

Today's leading-edge mystery shopping companies create a virtual "dashboard" that allows an owner to peer into the inner workings of his or her establishment.

Using a state-of-the-art blend of well-trained evaluators, cus-

tomized evaluation forms and powerful Web-based analysis tools, mystery shopping companies can zero in, track and report on any area of your business you desire. How inviting is the weekend lunch hostess? Which bartender's overpouring caused the inordinate liquor expense last

weekend? Is the taste and quality of our new dish better when Cook "A" or Cook "B" prepares it? What do people really think of the choices on our new menu? Which employees need more training?

What's more, the reports can gather information and return it

to you in a matter of hours or days. In so doing, you can now maximize your customers' experience and, as a result, maximize your repeat business.

Another major benefit of state-of-the-art mystery shopping services is trend tracking and location comparison. As all the

evaluations are placed into your own private database, you can use Web-based tools to compare the performance of shifts or locations and you can track changes across months or even years.

As a restaurant owner, if you're going to make the investment in mystery shopping, it is important that you contract with the right company. Does the company provide the exact services you think you'll need? Does it have extensive knowledge of the restaurant industry? What per-

**I**t is important you work with the right mystery shopping company. Does it provide the exact services you need? Does it practice what it preaches — exceptional service dedicated to repeat business?

centage of its business is devoted to restaurants? What type of evaluators is the company using? How well are the evaluators trained? Do the evaluators have experience in the restaurant industry thus bringing a higher level of knowledge to the table? Will you receive a customized form that tailors to the sequence of service and standards of your restaurant rather than just the basic industry standards? Does the company provide a turn-around time that allows you to take action and make changes if need be? Lastly and most important, does the company practice what it preaches — exceptional service that is dedicated to repeat business and happy customers?

Customers return when their experience of service, quality, taste, value and ambiance all add up to their favoring one establishment over its competitors. What is less obvious is how to understand customers' experience. No longer a one-dimensional service, a good mystery shopping company provides the guidance and feedback you need to get where you're going.

Choose the right company, and you will be able to improve your bottom line, increase customer satisfaction and keep customers coming back time and time again. ■