

# Service Evaluation

## Taking the mystery out of mystery shopping OR If you can measure it, you can manage it

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**Service evaluation** is just that – evaluating the delivery of service by your business to your customers.

Of course, for years we've known it as 'mystery or secret shopping', implemented by management to keep frontline staff on their toes!

The mere mention of the words 'mystery shopping' can send shivers up the spine of the most seasoned sales person.

It's the 'mystery' part that is the issue: no one likes being ambushed, and it's not a great motivator to surprise staff with unannounced reports aimed at 'catching them doing something wrong'.

From a business owners point of view, the objective is not nearly as sinister.

It can be as simple as not knowing if the service delivered to customers is of the same quality when he/she is not there or that it is consistent, irrelevant of the location and day of the week.

And anecdotal feedback from friends or business associates, is difficult to qualify and even more difficult to pass on to the staff concerned, because of the source.

And it's too late when the customer complains, of course we know that most won't, they'll just go elsewhere, and worst of all, relate their experience to as many potential customers that they can get their hands on.

Most areas of a retail business are measured in some manner, we know that – **'If you can measure it you can manage it'**, and of course if service delivery is really as important as we stress to frontline staff, then measuring it makes sense.

It's taken for granted that retailers will compare the takings banked to the takings expected, and to act on any variances or differences between the two.

And if the consistent delivery of quality service is the factor that is going to increase the quantity of those takings in a highly competitive market, measuring it to action any gaps, is a logical and necessary step.

So how can retailers, determined to improve the quality and consistency of service delivery, get **accurate, objective feedback** based on their specific criteria or 'promise' to the customer to translate into positive, tangible and actionable results.

Service Evaluation, of course – and the differences from how mystery shopping may have been experienced in the past are simple.

Service Evaluation is about **proactively testing the customer's service experience** and measuring the actual experience against the ideal that the business wants to deliver.

The key to successful service evaluation is the fact that it is accurate, objective, and fair, outcomes that can only be achieved if the **actual service is carried out by people outside of the business being evaluated**, with no scope for perceptions of bias or hidden agendas.

Firstly, the **approach should be positive one**, which is upfront and transparent, and the only 'mystery' is who the actual 'shopper' is and when they will visit.

The rest of the **process is known** – particularly to the people who may be 'tested'.

Ideally, the areas or behaviours to be evaluated should reflect those that staff know are expected and have received instruction or training in how to deliver.

By **letting staff know exactly what the customer experience should contain**, they have maximum opportunity to deliver that service to the customer, and therefore achieve a successful service evaluation result.

Of course there is an **investment** involved in implementing a service evaluation program, so the 'why' is important from a **cost / benefit** point of view.

A well-designed and implemented program can deliver any of the following outcomes -

- Identifying service delivery 'gaps'
- Clarifying training needs prior to development of training
- Measuring effectiveness of training
- Providing team or individual performance measures
- Testing compliance to specific company expectations, ie: sales steps / mode of sale
- Test effectiveness of loss prevention strategies and systems
- Recognition and reward of staff performance
- Measuring service delivery as a key performance indicator in an incentive program
- Determining the impact of marketing strategies
- Providing an indication of the intangibles of KASH (knowledge, attitude, skills, habits) of staff

**The first step** is to establish exactly what the business would like to be tested, the factors that are most important, and the point of difference that the customer's experience is expected to deliver.

From there the **evaluation tool** can be developed, typically a form that specifies the areas of the business to be evaluated and the importance or weighting of those areas in relation to the overall score.

This is a valuable process in itself as it allows for a **focus on 'the main things'** and clarifies the priorities of the business, from a customer-focused viewpoint.

Service evaluation is most effective when there is a **clear definition by the business of what it wants the customer to experience**, and this in turn establishes the benchmark to be achieved and maintained.

**The evaluation tool** is typically a form that breaks the experience down into areas within, which are specific questions that the operative must answer, ideally with a yes or no response.

**The results** being both quantitative and qualitative, with the score reflecting whether the desired behaviour was displayed, backed up with a comment to qualify the score and give valuable additional feedback.

**Involving staff** in the development of the process is crucial to acceptance of the results ongoing.

Team members will accept service evaluation on **areas within their control**, but may not accept evaluation on areas in which they have little or no impact, such as store design or product quality.

**The areas evaluated** can vary from physical factors such as cleanliness and merchandising, to behavioural factors such as attitude, approach and sales and service performance and product knowledge.

**The format** is important, and by establishing the end customer for the information gathered – the frontline staff, and designing the process with them in mind, a format can be designed that clearly delivers direct feedback on their interaction with the customer, and acts as an action plan to recognise successes and address challenges.

**Written guidelines** need to be developed for instruction of operatives in specifically what the business expects, for example, is the initial customer approach based on a time limit, or based on the signals given by the customer, or what standard of cleanliness is expected - David Jones or warehouse sale.

**A scenario**, or a variety of scenarios, which allow for the operative to be prepared with a typical need or request, assists in providing an opportunity for the staff member and business to deliver all of the desired behaviours and ensures consistency in multi site operations.

**The operatives** will then be selected by the service provider to reflect the customer profile, and must demonstrate qualities of fairness, ability to follow instructions, and ability to meet the set deadline.

Unlike other forms of market research, the operative is not being asked for an opinion on their likes and dislikes, but to **suspend** their personal opinions and specifically carry out the scenario designed to allow team members to deliver optimal service, and ultimately report on the experience, accurately and objectively.

**The provider** then manages the labour intensive aspects of scheduling, training and managing operatives, editing reports, developing a summary, and delivering the product within the set time frames.

It is a method that provides for **credible reporting** which can be relayed to the relevant team members with confidence.

Done well, service evaluation removes the negatives often associated with mystery shopping, as it is an **upfront process** where staff are informed of exactly what is to be tested. Ideally, staff are trained and know that the business requires them to pass on during the customers experience, and are therefore well placed to succeed.

**Ongoing and regular** service evaluation promotes the service behaviours continually and provides a fast, effective means of tracking the state of the customers experience through varying trading conditions.

Today many progressive companies integrate service evaluation with employee training and incentive programs to provide **positive, tangible and actionable results**.

A service evaluation program is most effective as an established ongoing program, where staff are involved and know that **any customer could be the service evaluation operative**.

#### **What to look for in a provider –**

A company that -

- can demonstrate an understanding of your business sector and culture
- will assist in developing a customised evaluation tool
- has a large pool of operatives who are employed directly (as opposed to being contractors), so that workers compensation and superannuation requirements are complied with
- can provide a fast turnaround time
- can provide client references



Renata Ringin is the Managing Director of Pro Active Strategies Pty Ltd, an independent National consultancy providing services to retailers in Australia, New Zealand and South East Asia.

The service evaluation division is managed and operated by team members with extensive experience in Senior Management roles with leading retailers as well as expertise in market research methodologies.

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