

Mystery shopping

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About this guidance

Mystery shopping is a research methodology that you can use to gain insight into how services in your local area operate from a service user perspective. This guide will help you through the process of carrying out a mystery shopping exercise. Topics covered in this guide include:

- What is mystery shopping?
- Types of mystery shopping
- When should you consider mystery shopping?
- Planning a mystery shopping exercise
- Running a mystery shopping exercise
- Ethical considerations

What is mystery shopping?

Mystery shopping is when trained individuals (the “mystery shoppers”) act as potential customers or service users and objectively report on their experiences of using a service. With this research method, the participants being evaluated are unaware that the researcher is anything other than an average customer.

Mystery shopping has many uses. It allows the researcher to experience the service from the view of a service user and can be used to assess various aspects of a service, such as accessibility, customer service or overall quality. It is crucial to establish the aim of the research before carrying out a mystery shopping exercise. This ensures that the mystery shoppers collect the most relevant data about their experience.

Example: Registering with a GP Practice

Healthwatch Greenwich carried out a mystery shopping exercise in December 2021 and March 2022 to review the process of registering with a GP practice. Their research aimed to examine:

- GP registration process for Greenwich residents
- Compliance with current regulations
- Support offered to patients with additional needs

Having clear aims allowed the mystery shoppers to focus their data collection. You can read the full report from Healthwatch Greenwich [here](#).

Types of mystery shopping

Mystery shopping does not have to be an in-person evaluation of a service. While face-to-face visits are an option, mystery shopping can also be done via telephone or online.

Face-to-face

Face-to-face mystery shopping involves the mystery shoppers visiting the service and using it like a usual patient or service user. This allows them to understand the “average” user experience and report their findings.

Example: Experiences of Sexual Health Services in Cheshire

Healthwatch Cheshire West and Healthwatch Cheshire East undertook two mystery shopper visits to sexual health centres, one in September 2018 and the other in December 2018. The mystery shoppers were Healthwatch staff members who attended the clinics and requested sexual health screenings, just as an actual patient would. They reported back on their experience in more detail.

You can read the full report from Healthwatch Cheshire West and Healthwatch Cheshire East [here](#).

Telephone

Telephone mystery shopping is another method that can be used alongside face-to-face mystery shopping or as a replacement. Like face-to-face mystery shopping, the mystery shoppers call a service and pretend to be a service user throughout the interaction while recording information relevant to the project's aims. Additionally, a mystery shopper can say they are calling on behalf of another service user, who may be an imaginary person registered at the practice.

Example: GP Surgery Mystery Shopping Report

Healthwatch Haringey planned a mystery shopping exercise from December 2020 to January 2021. They called 39 GP surgeries to see how long it would take for a patient to speak to a staff member and recorded anything that could influence a patient's decision to call back in the future.

You can read the full report from Healthwatch Haringey [here](#).

Online

Online mystery shopping can be desk-based research or live chats with service providers. For example, this method can be used to investigate service websites to understand the quality and availability of information available to service users. You can use live chats to assess how services interact with service users in that format.

Example: GP Websites Mystery Shopping Report

Healthwatch Warwickshire carried out a mystery shopping research project in February and March 2022 to attempt to navigate GP websites through a patient's position. They assessed how easy it was to find information such as opening hours or guidance on alternative NHS services through the website.

You can read the full report from Healthwatch Warwickshire [here](#).

When should you consider mystery shopping?

When planning any research project, it is essential to consider the aims of the research when deciding on a methodology. Mystery shopping allows you to replicate a service user's experience to check the service quality anonymously and unbiasedly. Mystery shoppers can evaluate various aspects of the service, such as accessibility, availability of information and treatment by staff members.

Pros and cons of mystery shopping

This research method is a cheap option that provides insight into what members of the public experience. Mystery shopping can be done by staff or volunteers, which reduces the number of external resources needed to carry out a project using this method. Additionally, online and telephone mystery shopping can be carried out remotely.

However, this methodology is limited as it only provides a snapshot of the service for one point in time. For example, the mystery shopping exercise's findings may differ from the average patient experience. It could instead only be representative of that particular day or time. Additionally, there may be variation between mystery shoppers in what they consider good or bad, and you may not get detailed feedback. Ensuring that there is as little variation as possible between the mystery shoppers will require time to properly prepare all of them, which includes making sure they understand what they are trying to do.

Planning a mystery shopping exercise

Aims and objectives

When planning a mystery shopping exercise, it is essential to establish the aims of the research project. Having clearly defined research aims makes it easier to plan what data the mystery shoppers should collect when they conduct the exercise. It also ensures that you can communicate to stakeholders and management the research's intended outcome and why it is an important project. The aims will inform what type of mystery shopping (or a mix of types) is most appropriate for your project.

When setting the aims for a mystery shopping exercise, consider whether the aims are SMART targets, like any other research project. SMART goals are specific, measurable, accepted, realistic, and time-bound.

Consider different settings to mystery shop

This research methodology can be used in various healthcare settings, including GP and dental practices, urgent care centres, pharmacies, or other health clinics. Mystery shopping aims to understand how service users experience a service to identify how it can be improved. Thus, it can be a valuable tool to evaluate services you know are not benefitting service users to the maximum extent to pinpoint specific targets for improvement. It is not recommended to mystery shop your own services. It could risk your relationship with that service, especially if the provider finds out what you are doing.

Questions and data to collect

Once the research aims and data to be collected have been clarified, the mystery shoppers (volunteers or staff members) need to be on the same page regarding their roles. They should ask the same questions or request the same services upon their visit. This allows the experiences of mystery shoppers to be compared. The questions asked should be objective to minimise bias, which is imperative in any research project. The questionnaire should also be kept as short as possible so that the mystery shoppers can accurately report their experience following the visit. Questions that are yes/no are simpler to remember and ensure objective answers.

While the mystery shoppers should be trained and need to remember the questions or aspects they want to evaluate, it is important that the interaction does not seem scripted. The purpose is to evaluate a typical service user experience in an anonymous way that replicates the experience of an actual service user. Mystery shoppers must be adaptable in their visit as conversations may go differently than planned, and you may need to ask the questions differently to get an answer.

When planning what questions your mystery shoppers should ask or what data to collect, you should consider what is realistic. Especially for face-to-face mystery shopping, it is better to have your mystery shoppers measure a few particular things, such as how long they were waiting to be seen and whether the provider introduced themselves. The mystery shoppers cannot enter the service with a notebook, so they need to recall the interaction when they are able to write down notes. It may be helpful to provide the mystery shoppers with a checklist or form to fill out after the exercise, which will also help to remind them what to focus on in the interaction.

A report by East Sussex includes the questions their mystery shoppers addressed when reviewing GP websites and out-of-hour phone messages in October and November 2021. You can view the full report [here](#), with appendices 2 and 3 showing the review questions.

Training your mystery shoppers

The mystery shoppers must be well briefed before the exercise commences. The mystery shoppers need to thoroughly understand what they are meant to do, and everyone must be on the same page regarding their roles. As mentioned previously, this is to minimise variation. The alternative is having only one staff member carry out the exercise; however, this would take considerably more time. When using more than one mystery shopper, it is good to have check-ins with them to see how it is going. It may be helpful to provide your mystery shoppers with a scenario. This can be the same scenario tested by mystery shoppers at different times. Providing a more detailed scenario to prepare your mystery shoppers with will help them understand exactly what they should be measuring.

It would help if you also thought through what questions the service is likely to ask your mystery shoppers (e.g. name, date of birth, etc.), so they can prepare to provide fake names or answers when asked.

Additionally, it would help if you prepared for things that may go wrong in a mystery shopping exercise. For example, if you run a telephone mystery shop and cannot get through on the phone to a person. In this case, you may need to plan additional dates/times to run the exercise. Planning through things that may go wrong will allow your mystery shoppers to be more prepared and composed

throughout the exercise. It may be good to have a test run of the exercise to see what works well and what does not.

Running a mystery shopping exercise

The mystery shoppers will visit or call the service at the agreed-upon time and date. They will use the developed questionnaire to guide their interaction with the service provider; however, the exchange should not seem rehearsed. The mystery shoppers should not identify themselves as such so they can replicate a typical experience as a member of the public. If the interaction seems rehearsed or unnatural, it may alert the provider to the fact that the shopper is not a real service user. As mentioned previously, it may be helpful to provide some training for the mystery shoppers to ensure they all understand their role. Notes about the interaction should be written down as soon as possible to make the report accurate.

You should provide your mystery shoppers with tips for how to get out of the scenario in case they want to leave mid-conversation. For example, for a telephone mystery shop, telling them to say, “I’m getting another call I need to answer, I need to call back later”, or something similar. This again prepares your mystery shoppers better for situations they may not foresee in the interaction. Thoroughly preparing mystery shoppers means they are less likely to give away their identity.

Reporting your findings

When reporting the findings of your mystery shopping exercise, you will need to move away from writing about every individual interaction to reporting on the overall trends. You will need to consider the best way to do this based on the data you collected and your report's main audience. For example, suppose you are trying to see how easy it is to find specific information on a website, such as how to register as a new patient. In that case, you can have your mystery shoppers record how long it took them to find that information and report the average amount of time.

Ethical considerations

When planning and running a mystery shopping exercise, it is vital to consider data protection guidelines. Mystery shopping differs from other research types because it is not announced that the research is taking place, so the anonymity of participants is imperative. Mystery shopping aims to improve service user experiences and the quality of the service rather than to evaluate the performance of specific employees. Thus, reports from a mystery shopping exercise should focus on where improvements in the service can be made, not finding faults in individual staff members. Additionally, there is debate on whether the term “mystery shopping” should be used. Some reports have referred to these research projects as website or telephone audits.

It is also important to consider the external circumstances of the service where you want to conduct the exercise and the type of mystery shopping you are planning. For example, many people report that they find it hard to get through to someone when they call their GP surgery. If you were planning an exercise about accessibility or how to get information from your GP, you should consider whether it is best to carry out a telephone exercise for GP surgeries in the context of the current pressures the NHS is facing. This highlights the importance of setting out aims and objectives in the planning stage of your research again. You can then judge whether your research question and the approach are necessary, robust, proportionate, legitimate, and appropriate. You can see our guidance for more information about ethics when planning a research project [here](#).

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