

ROVING REPORTER

These 'shoppers' take the mystery out of customer service

By JENNIFER TROXELL
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One day last month, another woman and I walked into an upscale gift shop to do some shopping. Only we weren't really shopping. Instead, we were secretly evaluating the appearance, manner and effectiveness of the employees.

A display counter filled with sparkling jewelry drew our attention. My companion and I, dressed in business suits, wandered over to the display, and looked at rings, necklaces and earrings. We waited 10 minutes for a woman sales associate in her 20s to approach us.

She had been fixing her blond ponytail in a mirror behind another counter, and we had to raise our voices in order to get her to assist us.

"Oh, can we see this necklace?" my companion asked when the clerk walked over to the counter.

She pulled out a diamond-studded necklace, which we examined carefully, noting it had a price tag of more than \$500. It was in a small box, and she placed it atop the glass counter-top. Then she went back to arranging other merchandise in the store, and left us alone with the exquisite piece.

Presently, an older woman sales associate came over and pointed out the quality of the diamonds.

Within a few minutes, we strolled out of the shop empty-handed but ready to make our report.

This gift shop had just become the first target in a mock Mystery Shopper trip, which by day's end included several other Lehigh Valley businesses. We visited — and evaluated — four other establishments that day:



Tina Hamilton, left, president of HireVision, goes over paperwork with Business Journal reporter Jennifer Troxell. The two women recently visited five Lehigh Valley establishments and posed as shoppers to judge the quality of customer service, merchandise and services at each.

Mystery shoppers aren't looking to get people fired from stores

There's an old saying that goes, "As goes the staff, so goes the store."

If a business has good people in place, it will do well, and plenty of companies know that, which is why they come to a staffing management firm like HireVision.

"We do hiring management services. Companies hire us to handle their staffing process. We're an alternative to staffing firms," says Tina Hamilton, owner of HireVision.

A portion of Hamilton's clients are looking to get "an overall perception of how their company is seen," she said, which is how HireVision got involved in mystery shopping.

Unlike national mystery shopping companies, Hamilton's office doesn't purchase employment ads in daily papers, but rather gets most of its business through referrals. The firm has gained its share of client companies that want to stay knowledgeable about how the public perceives the services and products that they offer.

HireVision caters to small and mid-size businesses, training 15

to 20 people every few months to secretly shop at places such as department stores, restaurants, home improvement outlets and area organizations.

Applicants receive initial calls from Tina Zaun, employee analyst at HireVision. "We're not looking for people that want to complain about a company or have other prejudices," she said.

Those who make it to the orientation stage are trained and told to expect an e-mail with the description of their first job and guidelines for how to complete it.

HireVision doesn't watch for employees who are stealing or to determine whether an employee should be fired. According to Hamilton, her firm needs a private investigation license before it can do that.

Zaun said, "These are companies that hire us and are not looking to fire their employees. They're trying to uncover people who work for them."

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two gyms, a hoagie shop and an office supply store.

All told, the shopping trip took about three hours to complete.

I was the mystery shopper while my companion, Tina Hamilton, served as my guide and trainer for the day.

Hamilton owns HireVision, a firm that provides staffing management services. Her Whitehall office helps its clients — many of whom are small-to mid-sized companies — select and train independent contractors to serve as mystery shoppers. Just as I did, they visit stores posing as customers in order to define the strengths and weaknesses of a company and how it treats its customers.

In the case of the Lehigh County gift shop, for instance, I wrote in my report: "The shop had above average merchandise, but the customer service was lacking."

A few hours before, Hamilton and Tina Zaun, an employee analyst for HireVision, had taken me through an orientation typical of someone who is training to become a mystery shopper. Part of the shopper's job is to go into a business looking for answers to complete a questionnaire provided by HireVision.

The observations that the mystery shopper makes are often times compiled in the form of a chart or graph and eventually sent to HireVision's clients.

Hamilton has done her own mystery shopping on occasion.

"A lot of it is about memorization," she said during our excursion. "Sometimes, I find myself going back into a place after I've already been there for so long and I have to pretend I forgot something so I can finish

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answering the questions.”

She cited the example of one company: a restaurant that requested all of its employees wear a hair net or hat, uniform and name tag. The company wanted HireVision to see whether the employees were following the dress code.

Hamilton, in the role of mystery shopper, remembered to look for the hair net, hat and uniform but not the name tag, so she went back into the restaurant with the excuse that she needed napkins with her takeout order.

“I tell people when they mystery shop they should always leave a business, go out to their car and immediately write down what they saw because it’s so easy to forget,” said Hamilton.

According to the owner and her assistant, Zaun, 50 percent to 75 percent of the people hired to be mystery shoppers are professional people and housewives. Zaun said that people applying for the position of mystery shopper are considered independent contractors and as such they have to have the proper qualifications, home access to a computer and reliable transportation.

“It’s not really even a part-time job,” said Hamilton. “It’s just a way for them to make some money, more of a side thing.”

Many times a mystery shopper is paid in the form of a gift certificate from the company where he or she secretly shopped. Other times, the shopper receives a check from HireVision.

Customer service

The day this reporter tried her hand at being a mystery shopper, the customer service left much to be desired.

My first task was to call an event planner for a local organization pretending to be a tourist who wanted to know more about an annual festival taking place in the area.

The event planner, a woman who sounded about 30, politely informed me that her organization had little or no information on the event. She immediately gave me a phone number and directed me to another organization in the area that handled it.

While I didn’t have the answers I was looking for when we hung up, I did at least have information on the place that could help me find those answers. If I had to rate the event planner on a scale from one to 10, I would have given her a seven for effort.

Two companies on my itinerary were workout facilities, which were put on my schedule to compare and contrast later. The one Hamilton and I visited after the gift shop seemed to zap the energy right out of us.

The decor didn’t strike us as a good marketable tool. The location was painted a dull purple color; pop music from the 1950s poured through a stereo speaker as those working out made their rounds to different stations every few minutes.

A short-haired woman in her 20s, dressed in sweats, identified herself as the co-owner of the fitness center when greeting us. We told her that we were two friends interested in doing some exercising on our lunch break. She began telling us about the facility’s 30-minute fitness circuit and gave us a tour. She ended by showing us the back room, which, among other things, housed a sauna that wasn’t included in the cost of a customer’s membership.

My report this time read: “The

place was somewhat clean but there were things that were totally out of place, i.e., the playpen in one of the back rooms.”

The next exercise center was similar in setup and presentation, with a few people doing their workout by changing machines every few minutes.

A woman in her 40s offered us a seat when we walked in. She quickly told us she worked there and proceeded to take us through the cost of membership.

Hamilton and I each received a brochure with the price of monthly membership written on the front. As we questioned the woman, it seemed that she didn’t know much about machines, but at least, this place appeared more upbeat and less cluttered.

Leaving the location, Hamilton said, “The hours are limited. If you’re working, you probably wouldn’t choose the place.”

We remarked on the fact there were no incentives to joining the program. At least at the first fitness center, the woman offered us a \$10 discount card on our way out. Again, the marketing technique used at this facility to reel us into membership was called to question.

Lunchtime shopping

Our next stop: a hoagie shop where we would eat lunch but continue to mystery shop. We were to observe the customer service, attire of employees and sanitation practices.

The staff, a few guys in their 20s, failed to meet the dress code requirements since they were not wearing aprons or name tags, but the meal was fine and the establishment was relatively clean.

Had I been a real mystery shopper I would have kept my

receipt to send in for reimbursement.

One negative note in my report read: “The full-length mirror in front of the toilet in the bathroom didn’t seem to serve much purpose.”

Hamilton expressed disappointment in the results of our experiment. She said that the four places we had visited demonstrated poor marketing efforts.

Lunch ended, but there was one last store to visit.

Since the customer service at this point wasn’t up to par, we were prepared to wait forever for assistance at the next business, which turned out to be an office supply store.

We developed a plan before going in: we were two customers looking to purchase a new desk for Hamilton’s office. With that in mind, we made a beeline for the store’s furniture section and began inspecting desks.

It took about five minutes for a sales associate to ask if we needed help.

The man showed interest in making a sale and impressed Hamilton and me by rattling off prices and catalog information. He showed us various features of the desk we were admiring and explained its advantages to us.

“You might want to pick a chair to try out with this desk,” he said. “A lot of people don’t think of that, but you need to know you’ll be comfortable with it.”

His marketing pitch was so good that we were almost persuaded to purchase the merchandise.

In terms of customer service, he got the best report of the day.

Back at Hamilton’s office, Tina Zaun took me through the process of filling out my report online — a task that every mystery shopper has to do when they finish a job.

It was the last detail left in an eye-opening day.