Article

Developing a Mystery Shopping Measure to Operate a Sustainable Restaurant Business: The Power of Integrating with Corporate Executive Members' Feedback

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Abstract: Mystery shopping has been used to objectively measure whether employees follow the visions of a company's quality service standards. It then creates a feedback loop that allows companies to train their employees to consistently deliver quality services. The main purposes of this project are aimed at examining (1) the overall benefits of mystery shopper projects in the hospitality business through literature reviews; and (2) the importance of how a company can work with an outside agency (consultant, academic institution, *etc.*) to develop a mystery shopping program that can enhance and complement ongoing service quality programs. A casual steakhouse restaurant in the Eastern U.S. was selected as our pilot project. The basic concept of using secret shoppers is to have individuals experience real-time and onsite quality of services and record how the mystery shoppers felt about the quality of services and if the employees met or exceeded the company's standards. For this reason, the authors believe that mystery shopping, especially in hospitality, is an important means of developing and maintaining a sustainable business. While the sustainability of a business is largely dependent upon "people, profits and planet" in the hospitality industry, it is also dependent upon meeting service standards and developing a feedback loop. Mystery shopping programs have demonstrated their ability to contribute to organizations in this regard.

1. Introduction

Mystery shopping can be a critical component of a company's "toolbox" to develop and maintain service standards. It has been used extensively in a variety of industries, including the hospitality industry, for this very purpose. It can also serve as a means for helping to maintain a sustainable business model, in today's consumer driven world.

Mystery shopping can take different forms but is perhaps best defined as follows: "Mystery shopping can be defined as the use of concealed participant observers to measure a service encounter (p. 63) [1]". While it is used extensively in retail operations, it is also used widely in hospitality industries, as suggested by Finn and Kayande [2]. Research on mystery shopping has attempted to answer various question including how best to integrate it into a larger service management program.

Both of the authors of this paper have served as mystery shoppers for different U.S. restaurant companies and have benefitted from those experiences. They have also witnessed first-hand how effective that they can be, given adequate corporate support. This paper reviews some of the major findings in the literature. It then describes a mystery shopping program introduced at a steak restaurant, and the steps of the process from instrument development to debriefing with corporate executives.

2. Literature Review

Mystery shopping has been used extensively in a variety of industries, including the medical, retail, hospitality, and tourism fields, among others. Further, over the last 20 years, it has received greater attention in the literature. Topics have ranged from the development of programs to the recruiting of shoppers to measuring the effectiveness of programs. The following section summarizes some of the key articles published in the business, hospitality, and tourism literature during this time.

2.1. Mystery Shopping Case Studies

Quite a few case studies of different companies in different industries are reported in the literature. For instance, Van Der Wiele, Hesselink, and Van Iwaarden [3] reported on the use of mystery shopping to evaluate services in a Dutch employment agency; Pinar, Eser, and Strasser [4] reported on the use of mystery shopping to evaluate the quality of services in Turkish banks; Mattsson [5] discussed the use of mystery shopping in the Business-to-Business (B2B) sector in Sweden; Hapenciuc, Stanciu, and Costea [6] used mystery shopping to measure speed, accuracy and politeness of travel agents in Romania; and Granatino, Verkamp, and Parker [7] used mystery shopping to measure employee engagement and customer-service performance in a health care setting. Results consistently showed the benefits of mystery shopping across industries and settings while also evaluating costs and other considerations.

2.2. Development of Mystery Shopping Programs

Beck, Lalopa and Hall [8] described the service environment in the U.S. Air Force and the increasing emphasis upon customer service. They recommended the implementation of a mystery shopping program on Air Force bases, while acknowledging the barriers to implementation. The authors designed and tested a program at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base. Program elements included: marketing materials, recruiting materials, evaluation forms, training program, shopping schedule, program budget, recognition program, and other administrative requirements (p. 46).

The emphasis was on the recruiting and training of shoppers, which included the development of a training guide, training sessions and a recognition program for employees who were identified as top performers. The program was piloted using 36 shoppers who conducted 43 visits. The researchers then assessed the effectiveness of the program based upon feedback from the shoppers. The authors made several recommendations for improvement including recruiting, training and recognition. The authors deemed the program a success and one that equipped the base with tools for improving customer service.

2.3. Performance Analysis

Rood and Dziadkowiec [9] compared pre-visit expectations of mystery shoppers with post-visit data, using importance performance analysis (IPA). Two hundred visits to restaurants in the U.S. and Poland were examined. The authors measured 35 different restaurant performance attributes. In doing so, the authors found that (1) in both countries, results showed variance between expectations and actual performance (performance being lower in both cases) and; (2) overall satisfaction to be higher in Poland. The authors concluded that IPA, as a mystery shopping tool, can reveal useful information for hospitality managers.

2.4. Mystery Shopping as Part of the Service Delivery Process

Wilson [10] studied the role of mystery shopping as it relates to the service delivery process. The author interviewed managers of mystery shopping programs in four different industries, as well as directors of four market research agencies that commissioned mystery-shopping services. Specifically, the author sought to explore "the reasons for using mystery shopping as a measure of service performance; the procedures used to ensure the objectivity and reliability of mystery shopping research; and the use made of mystery shopping data and the manner in which this data is communicated to service personnel" (p. 151). The interviews revealed that mystery shopping is likely to continue as a measure of service quality but that it may be complemented with other measures such as recording technology and operational data. The author concluded by suggesting that standards constantly be reviewed and updated for maximum effectiveness.

2.5. Ethics

Wilson [11] looked at mystery shopping as a form of deception, in which employees are deceived into believing that mystery shoppers are actual guests. The author conducted a study in which he examined the purposes of mystery shopping, its procedures, and how resulting evaluative information is shared with employees. Information was collected through interviews with representatives of ten companies

and research firms that utilized or contracted mystery shopping services. Respondents indicated that mystery shopping was used to complement other methods of evaluation; that all companies attempted to increase the objectivity of their measures; and that the proper recruiting/screening and hiring of shoppers is critical. Finally, all companies acknowledged the importance of the training of the shoppers.

The companies also reported working to minimize the deception of employees by preparing the employees and explaining the purpose of the programs. The authors concluded by suggesting that "mystery-shopping results are used for three main purposes: (a) to act as a diagnostic tool identifying failings and weak points in an organization's service delivery; (b) to encourage, develop, and motivate service personnel by linking performance measurement tools directly with appraisal, training, and reward mechanisms; and (c) to assess the competitiveness of an organization's service provision by benchmarking it against the offerings of others in an industry" (p. 73).

2.6. Mystery Shopping and Customer Satisfaction

Minghetti and Celotto [12] stressed the important role that tourist information offices (TIO) play in contributing to visitor satisfaction and destination image and attempted to correlate and combine the results of mystery shopping with customer satisfaction research in order to assess the overall performance of TIOs in Austria and Italy. The authors suggested that the information that TIOs provide is both a product and a service, thus making it challenging to measure and quantify. They further suggested that combining mystery shopping with customer satisfaction surveys (which they attempt to correlate) would combine the strengths of both processes while mitigating their weaknesses.

"The findings confirm that mystery shopping is not a substitute for traditional and quantifiable consumer market research and *vice versa* [13]. A visitor survey is based on perceptions and makes explicit the emotional component of visitor satisfaction/dissatisfaction on a range of service elements. On-site shops help to investigate the quality and value associated with these elements as determinants of the rational component of satisfaction (p. 577)."

2.7. Motivations of Mystery Shoppers

Other researchers investigated the attitudes/performance/and motivations of the shoppers themselves. Allison, Severt, and Dickson [14] studied mystery shopper motivations and proposed a model for better understanding these motivations. Invitations to be interviewed were sent to 64 independently contracted shoppers in Florida, of which 27 participated. Most of the participants were mystery shoppers in the hospitality industry while health care and the music industry were also represented. In trying to identify motivating factors, the authors identified 14 dimensions including "enjoyment, excitement, escapism, undercover aspect, impact, personal development, learning opportunity, discretionary compensation, nondiscretionary compensation, pride, exclusivity, prestige, client benefit, and mystery shopping company benefit (p. 629)". The authors concluded by proposing a model, taking into consideration both costs and benefits, that contribute to shopper motivations. By understanding more about the motivations of mystery shoppers, mystery-shopping companies may use these costs and benefits to construct how they recruit and market the benefits of mystery shopping to potential shoppers. The authors concluded by stating that "By understanding more about the motivations of mystery shoppers, mystery shopping

companies may use these costs and benefits to construct how they recruit and market the benefits of mystery shopping to potential shoppers (p. 653)".

In a follow-up study, Allison and Severt [1] continued to look at the motivations of mystery shoppers. Since mystery shoppers cannot be considered either full time employees or volunteers, the authors questioned what motivated them over time. They also tested whether "motivation crowding" applied to mystery shoppers. They surveyed 315 shoppers from a mystery shopping firm in Florida. They found differences among shoppers with varying levels of experience, and how their motivations shifted over time. For instance, the shoppers with the most experience (25 or more visits) reported an increase in intrinsic motivation and an increase in extrinsic motivation over time, while also reporting higher means than groups with less experience.

"Results of the main study between–within subjects analysis of variance indicated motivation crowding may shift from intrinsic motivation remaining the dominant factor for participation for inexperienced mystery shoppers to extrinsic motivation becoming the dominant factor for participation for mystery shoppers with over 25 mystery shops performed (p. 74)". Given the differences, the authors recommend that mystery shopping firms consider both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards when recruiting shoppers, as well as over time as shoppers become more experience and crowding in may shift.

2.8. Effectiveness of Programs

Finn and Kayande [2] conducted a psychometric study of mystery shopping in order to determine the effectiveness and generalizability of the data in two subsequent studies. In the first study, the authors used an adapted SERVQUAL instrument to conduct mystery shop visits to three coffee shop outlets. A total of 45 reports were used in the analysis. A customer survey was conducted simultaneously in order to compare results. An analysis of the mystery shopping data showed sources of variance to include outlets by shoppers, random error, and the outlets themselves. Comparisons suggest that mystery shopping was more cost effective (when achieving a comparable g-coefficient) than was conducting customer surveys. The authors then conducted two follow-up studies, using secondary shopping data. They concluded that while mystery shoppers can produce highly reliable data, in a cost efficient manner, they suggested caution in relying too much on individual reports. Instead, they strongly suggested using aggregated data from multiple reports.

2.9. Surveys of Industry Practices

Hotels. Beck and Miao [15] randomly selected hotels from a hotel database and surveyed general managers and controllers of those hotels about their mystery shopping practices and the perceived effectiveness of their programs. It was determined that the majority of hotels had mystery shopping programs in place, conducted their programs quarterly (or more often) and contracted the services out to specialized firms. The authors reported that "The two primary purposes of mystery shopping revealed in this study are to evaluate service quality and monitor cash handling and asset control procedures (p. 12)".

Restaurants. Su and Tsai [16] surveyed chain restaurant managers in Taiwan to determine their perceptions of the effectiveness of mystery shopping. One hundred and eighty three responses from managers from a variety of restaurants were analyzed. It was determined that: (1) most mystery shopping programs were implemented to measure service quality; (2) most shoppers hired were hired through

corporate offices; and (3) most visits are conducted on a monthly basis. A factor analysis revealed that managers perceived mystery shopping to be most effective in the areas of "product quality standards," "service skill standards," and "asset control." The authors concluded that "Chain restaurants still need to consider… Mystery shopping may not be the perfect means of assessing quality within a franchise system, but it remains an effective method of helping franchisees the minimum levels of service quality required by franchisors (p. 280)".

The literature suggests that mystery shopping is used as a means of measuring and maintaining quality standards in a variety of industries. It continues to be used in the hospitality and tourism industries, as evidenced by several studies conducted in hotels, restaurants, and tourism organizations. They can be effective (and cost efficient) provided that companies plan the programs adequately. Among other things, companies should consider what to measure, how to measure it, frequency of visits, recruiting, selection and training of shoppers, compensation, and dissemination of information. The literature provides recommendations in managing each of these facets. Hotel and restaurant companies, in particular, can benefit greatly from these programs.

3. The Purpose of the Study

A company's goals often aim to train its employees to consistently deliver quality services. Concurrently, mystery-shopping measurement has been used effectively to objectively evaluate whether employees follow the visions of a company's quality service. Areas that are often measured during a mystery shopping visit include the condition of the driveway, condition and lighting of the parking area, lighting and general maintenance of the front area, security, pavement surface, landscapes, outdoor signage, clear direction, accessibility, the cleanliness of the foyer and the lobby, timely assistance, greeting manners, friendless and professionalism of staff and managers, effectiveness of greeting and serving procedures, and quality of services throughout the visit. Mystery shopping visits can also determine if there are visible and clear exits, functional facilities, and instructions about what should be done in case of fire and other emergencies.

Studying various measurements of quality of service in the hospitality and tourism industries has attracted notable attention in the literature [9,10,16]. Types of measurements have included focus groups, on-site audits, continued employee training and development programs, customer comment cards, hard copies of questionnaires, online surveys, benchmark analyses, and mystery shopping approaches.

Based on the outcome of a mystery shopper's observation and experience, a hospitality business may consider establishing training strategies to ensure that the quality of services meet and/or exceed company policies and standards. For example, a ringing phone needs to be picked up within seven seconds, a front-door greeting needs to be performed within seven seconds, the waiting time for check-in and check-out should not exceed five minutes, a staff member cannot pass a guest without greeting them, and staff members should assist customers in a pleasant voice and with professional manners. Examining the quality of food items, pleasant facilities, and retaining the potential and existing customers with bonus offers and extra assistance will be a good strategic start.

The main purposes of this project are aimed at examining (1) the overall benefits of mystery shopper projects in the hospitality business through literature reviews; and (2) the importance of how a company

can work with an outside agency (consultant, academic institution, *etc.*) to develop a mystery shopping program that can enhance and complement ongoing service quality programs.

4. Methods

A casual steakhouse restaurant in the Eastern U.S. was selected as our pilot project to examine the level of clarity of the newly developed mystery shopper evaluation form. This selected restaurant is one of 18 restaurants that belong to a corporate chain that operates eighteen restaurants across four states in the Eastern U.S. Under this steakhouse brand, all restaurants feature rich, wood interiors, warm burning fireplaces, premium bars, and a large glass display case featuring their daily fresh cut meats. This selected steakhouse restaurant hosts 60 tables and serves primarily premium, aged, steaks, chops and prime rib.

The Mystery Shoppers

The principal investigator of this secret shopper project obtained support from the corporate office and collaborated with a marketing consultant company that provided a list of locals who have worked in the food industry and expressed their interests to be a secret shopper when opportunities arise. We conducted telephone interviews followed by face-to-face meetings to select fourteen mystery shoppers who were identified as steakhouse lovers and would be interested in dining at this selected restaurant on a regular basis with families, friends and/or colleagues. A step-by-step procedure was distributed to the fourteen selected mystery shoppers who were also encouraged to raise any questions that they might have prior, during, and after their secret shopper duties. Each selected mystery shopper attended a three-hour training meeting. The evaluation form to be used at the restaurant was distributed to the secret shopper for them to fill in with their smartphone on-site. Smartphones were used instead of filling out a hard copy form to avoid drawing any possible attention or suspicion from the on-site staff or managers.

Fourteen mystery shoppers were given a US $50 (lunch) or a US $100 (dinner) gift card per person. Seven mystery shoppers visited the restaurant during lunch time (11:30 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.) and another seven mystery shoppers dined at the restaurant during dinner time (5:30 p.m. to 10:00 p.m.). In terms of the demographics of the mystery shoppers, the 14 shoppers were between 21 and 48 years of age. All of them have attended face-to-face individual meetings with the project principal investigator. Some shoppers had more dining-out experience with limited international trip experience, while others dine out at a regular basis and with various domestic trips. Apparently, mystery shoppers with more dining-out experience and trips provided more critical feedback and observations compared to those with a limited dining-out lifestyle and who have traveled no more than 200 miles in the past two years. The visits took place Monday to Sunday over the course of two weeks in February 2014. Each mystery shopper was asked to report his/her visit information including dollar amount spent (not including tip), day of week, date of visit, time of visit, business volume (from low to medium to high) and server's name (or description). The following aspects of quality of services were assessed: telephone manners, facility quality, host quality, quality of service, food items, food runners and on-site management. The visit recaps provided detailed evaluation information. The evaluation instrument was developed mainly based on input from a faculty member in the hospitality and tourism program at a university near this selected

restaurant. The leading faculty member was a marketing director and has conducted multiple mystery shopping projects. The listed evaluation items were confirmed by one senior vice president of the restaurant's corporate office to ensure that the evaluated items are suitable to the features of this particular selected restaurant.

5. Results

The majority of mystery shoppers rated telephone manners positively. The quality of exterior of the restaurant was rated as clean and well maintained. However, two shoppers noted the need to maintain well-lit conditions at night for safety's sake. Most of the shoppers noted proper and timely welcoming greetings. The average waiting time was 5 min for lunch and 10 min for dinner. More than 80% of the mystery shoppers did not receive any suggestions from his/her server regarding any specific drink or appetizer. More than fifty percent of mystery shoppers were offered chef's specials. Less than 20% of mystery shoppers reported receiving expressions of appreciation for their patronage upon leaving the restaurant. Approximately 30% of the mystery shoppers did not receive any water refills throughout the whole dining period.

More than 60% of mystery shoppers were satisfied with the quality of the food items. One shopper comment expressed concern about the overly warm room temperature, especially for those who sat next to the fireplace in the center of the restaurant. All mystery shoppers were concerned about the knowledge level of the food runners. Apparently, during the two weeks of the pilot test, the restaurant hired three new food runners who did not feel comfortable enough to have conversations with the guests. They simply delivered the food items without providing further comments and/or suggestions about the ordered food items (Tables 1–3).

Table 1. Evaluations of telephone, facility, and host.

Evaluated Items	Lunch		Dinner	
Telephone	**Yes**	**No**	**Yes**	**No**
Was the telephone answered promptly and professionally?	7		6	n/a (1)
Was the telephone answered in a friendly and enthusiastic manner?	7		6	n/a (1)
Were all of your questions answered accurately?	7		6	n/a (1)
Facility				
Did the exterior of the restaurant appear clean and well maintained?	7		7	
Did the interior of the restaurant appear clean and well maintained?	7		7	
Were the restrooms clean and well stocked?	6	1	6	1
Was the table top, menus, silverware and fixtures clean?	7		7	
Host				
Were you greeted promptly upon entering?	6	1	6	1
Were you given a proper welcoming greeting?	5	2	7	
Were you offered a seating preference?	5	2	3	4
If there was a wait, were you quoted a waiting time?	6	n/a (1)	4	1; n/a (2)
If quoted a waiting time, was it accurate within 5 min?	6	n/a (1)	4	1; n/a (2)
Did the greeting host seem genuinely friendly and make good eye contact with you?	7		7	
Were you offered a proper greeting upon leaving the restaurant?	4	3	5	2
Were you informed of who your server would be?	4	3	4	3

Table 2. Evaluations of service.

Evaluated Items	Lunch		Dinner	
Service	**Yes**	**No**	**Yes**	**No**
Were you greeted promptly by your server?	4	3	7	
Did your server suggest a specific drink or appetizer?		7	5	2
Were your beverages served promptly?	5	2	7	
Did your server mention the daily special?	2	5	5	2
Did your server have good menu knowledge?	7		6	1
Was your order taken in a timely manner after being seated?	5	2	6	1
Were there appetizer/bread plates available?	7		7	
Were the correct food and drink items delivered?	7		7	
Did your server check back within three minutes?	5	2	7	
Did your server offer you additional beverages in a timely manner?	5	2	5	2
Did your server anticipate your needs?	6	1	7	
Did your server honor your request on a timely basis?	6	1	6	1
Was your table manicured in a timely manner?	6	1	6	1
Were you offered dessert or coffee?	4	3	6	1
Was your check accurate and delivered promptly?	5	2	7	
Did you receive genuinely friendly service?	7		7	

Table 3. Evaluations of food, runners, and management.

Evaluated Items	Lunch		Dinner	
Food	**Yes**	**No**	**Yes**	**No**
Was the hot food hot/cold food cold?	7		7	
Did all food meet your expectations?	6	1	5	2
Was all food served promptly?	7		7	
Runners				
Did the food runner appear genuinely friendly?	5	2	6	1
Did the food runner contribute to the manicure of your table?	4	3	5	2
Did the runner honor your requests on a timely basis?	6	1	6	1
Management				
Based on this visit would you return to this RESTAURANT?	5	2	7	
Would you recommend this RESTAURANT?	5	2	6	1
Was the manager visible and interacting with guests?	3	4	3	4
If you asked to take some of your food with you, was it packaged by a staff member in a positive manner?	2	4; n/a (1)	5	1; n/a (1)
Was the noise level comfortable?	5	2	6	1
Was the temperature comfortable?	5	2	5	2
How would you rate your overall visit?	Positive (2) Average (4)	Negative (1)	Positive (5); Average (2)	

In the summary section, when mystery shoppers were asked to summarize their visit, here is a list of comments and thoughts.

5.1. Comments about Lunch

About Staff

"*The Hostess was the nicest out of everyone that served us.*"

"*Many of workers gathered around the bar talking to each other and it could be overheard that they were complaining about working.*"

"*The hostesses were in their own world. We could hear them talking when we walked in and left the restaurant. In fact, I said thank you to the hostess before they thanked us upon our departure.*"

"*Our server was excellent, the only thing he was unsure about was the use of our meal voucher, which he quickly figured out the answer to.*"

"*The server was a very routine server, meaning, you could tell he had been serving for a long time and had a script and routine he followed at every table. He wasn't interesting in talking to us even though I explicitly told him it was my first time at the restaurant. He was more interested in turning and burning his tables.*"

"*Running food and yelling back in to the kitchen.*"

"*I felt like a nuisance to the server. I had to ask for a water 3 times before he delivered one. He even took my plate up without asking me if it was okay.*"

"*Felt rushed to order. It took the server around 7 minutes to get our drinks then he kind of forced us to order.*"

"*Some servers were setting up a larger table beside us and joking around however it didn't take away from my dining experience.*"

"*The service was excellent. My server knew the answers to all of the questions I had about the menu and there was no point during the entire experience that my drink was not filled.*"

"*We rarely got refills, because she came back so infrequently and she never came by to take away any unwanted plates at our table.*"

"*The server and food runner made us feel that we were an inconvenience by having lunch at this restaurant and they seemed as if they did not want to be there working.*"

About Food

"*The bread was fabulous and the herb and olive oil dip was wonderful. The lunch prices were also really great for great sized portions, so glad they offered them on Sundays as well.*"

"*Food and atmosphere were very enjoyable.*"

About Facility

"*The men's bathroom had some dust and peeling of the wall in the bathroom.*"

"*It is too dark in the restaurant. Especially the bathrooms. It looks like germs are being hidden.*"

"*The décor and ambiance is really nice, minus the temperature inside.*"

"*The open fireplaces concern me for children, but at this kind of restaurant I believe they are appropriate and add to the décor.*"

Overall

"*Very friendly atmosphere, great at providing customer service.*"

"*There were also children who were screaming in a corner booth making the restaurant noisy.*"

5.2. Comments about Dinner

About Staff

"*Greeted upon entry by the greeter as well as by the bartender upon entering the bar.*"

"*The Host/Hostess should make more eye contact with the customers.*"

"*The server was very interested in up selling the menu and ensuring we were satisfied.*"

"*There was a dirty rag on a table but the server told the host to grab it as we were sitting. It was fast and good teamwork.*"

"*The server was very friendly, visible, and attentive. He came back to our table to ensure that everything was to our liking at that we were satisfied with the meal. He also made very good recommendations for dessert.*"

"*A warm visit and greeting from the general manager.*"

"*The staff was very warm and inviting and made you feel welcome. They were also very eager to serve you.*"

"*The server had not offered refills for water when I had an empty glass. After swiping the credit card, the server promptly left and did not check on us or wish us a good evening.*"

"*The servers seemed a little rushed/overwhelmed with the dinner crowd coming in.*"

"*No greeting or wish to see us again from the greeting staff when we left. No one open the door for our arrival nor our departure.*"

"*The servers differed in their service towards guests, quality-wise. The server would be more courteous to some of the guests than to others. This may have influenced a diner's overall experience if he was to represent all of the servers at this restaurant.*"

About Food

"*It is delicious.*"

"*Over cooked asparagus.*"

"*I loved that we received a kid's meal and crayons without having to ask, the kids meal also had a great selection!*"

About Facility

"*The restrooms were out of paper towels and there was toilet paper all over the bathroom floor.*"

"*The party next to me was very loud, it would have been more appropriate for them to have been in a secluded party room if available.*"

Overall

"*It is a beautiful restaurant with well-trained serving staff that was knowledgeable of the entire menu.*"

"*It was an extremely family friendly atmosphere. The music outside was welcoming and the entire restaurant seemed well put together.*"

"I don't see much advertisement for the restaurant though so I feel that many people simply don't know it exists, also it is kind of hidden."

"I was extremely uneasy about the highchair situation. Because we were sat in a higher sitting booth, the host stacked two high chairs on top of each other and scooted them as close to the table as she could get, which still wasn't close enough. As a host, I would not sit someone needing a highchair in a booth like this. I did not feel like this was safe for my child to sit in, the high chair was also really gross."

"Although the quality of the restaurant and food is outstanding, the offsetting factor of the overall experience was that the manager could have had tried to stop by our table or others'. We could not even identify who the manager is. Servers had neglected very basic, expected tasks, such as offering customers more water and stopping by after the customer had paid for the meal; Or wishing us a great evening when we usually tipped nicely. All of the listed factors above could be improved easily."

5.3. Corporate Follow-Up

The corporate vice president of operations of the selected restaurant was actively involved with the outcome of the pilot test. The vice president of operations effectively facilitated several managerial meetings with the general manager and assistant managers two weeks after the mystery shopper reports were presented. Several follow-up meetings were conducted with the onsite servers, runners, and hosts to ensure that they were recognized for their excellent service and continuously meeting and exceeding the standards of the corporate office.

5.4. Recommendations Following Pilot Test

We suggested utilizing a group of mystery shoppers who present a similar profile as the real customers of the tested restaurant's regular customers to reduce any bias and constraints of the shoppers' background. When we re-examined the length and areas of the mystery shopping evaluation form, we sought input from the corporate vice president of operations, one general manager, and another executive member. They thought the current instrument was suitable to the features and needs of the selected restaurant, but they would like to see a list of rating questions to be included in the future instrument for their effective implementation and practices. A list of questions suggested by the principal investigator and the executive members of the restaurant corporate office was compiled as below:

(1) Did any worker seem more interested in himself or other workers instead of the guests?
(2) Regarding volume levels, were there any instances during your visit when a worker was too loud? if so, what area? how many times?
(3) Describe your proximity to the kitchen.
(4) On a scale of 1 (worst) to 10 (best) how would you rate this visit in terms of the staff being genuinely warm and inviting?
(5) On a scale of 1 (worst) to 10 (best) how would you rate this visit based upon the staff delivering a 100% superior dining experience?
(6) Did your server make you feel that there was nothing more important than delivering a 100% superior dining experience to you?
(7) At anytime during your dining experience did you feel rushed? if so, explain.

(8)   What is the one thing you would suggest this restaurant do differently to improve its customer service?

(9)   At anytime during your visit did you not feel a warm, inviting, guest-first feeling? if so, explain.

(10) On a scale of 1 (definitely would not) to 10 (definitely would), if you were starting a restaurant how inclined would you be to hire your server based upon caring?

(11) On a scale of 1 (definitely would not) to 10 (definitely would), if you were starting a restaurant how inclined would you be to hire your server based upon sincerity?

(12) On a scale of 1 (definitely would not) to 10 (definitely would), if you were starting a restaurant how inclined would you be to hire your server based upon knowledge?

(13) On a scale of 1 (definitely would not) to 10 (definitely would), if you were starting a restaurant how inclined would you be to hire your server based upon efficiency?

(14) On a scale of 1 (not at all) to 10 (constant) describe the level of noise you heard during your dining experience coming from the service area.

(15) Did you hear any worker cough during your visit? how many total coughs did you hear?

(16) Did you hear any worker speaking to another worker about a subject unrelated to his task or job or the guest?

(17) Did anything disturb you during this visit? if so, please explain.

(18) What were you most impressed by during your dining experience?

(19) What were you least impressed by during your dining experience?

(20) Is there anything that stood out to you, positively or negatively, regarding cleanliness and sanitation? if so, please explain.

Using a scale of 1 to 10, certainly allows for overall ranking for each specific question to help the corporate office learn and understand where this restaurant stands in the customers' mind. However, some of the questions seemed to be wordy and some included too many items within one question that may distort the secret shopper's evaluation. Some questions might not be suitable for the secret shoppers to answer while asking "How inclined you would be to hire the server based upon efficiency?" Some secret shoppers enjoyed speaking to the servers, which might slow down the server's efficiency in serving other tables but increasing the overall warm feeling of this secret shopper's table, for example. Overall, most of the rating questions are useful and can reflect the selected restaurant's features in terms of enhancing customers' satisfaction and improving the image of the selected restaurant.

6. Conclusions

As has been discussed, over the decades, many hospitality businesses have utilized mystery-shopping approaches to examine their quality of services and various areas that need to be improved in all aspects. Tourism, hospitality, retail, banking and other various businesses have also used mystery shopping over the last two decades. Past studies have examined the quality of hospitality and tourism services based on guest expectations and preferences [9–17].

The basic concept of using secret shoppers is to have individuals experience real-time and onsite quality of services and record how the mystery shoppers felt about the quality of services and if the employees met or exceeded the company's standards. For this reason, the authors believe that mystery shopping, especially in hospitality, is an important means of developing and maintaining a

sustainable business. While the sustainability of a business is largely dependent upon "people, profits and planet" in the hospitality industry, it is also dependent upon meeting service standards and developing a feedback loop. Mystery shopping programs have demonstrated their ability to contribute to organizations in this regard.

The importance of measuring customer satisfaction has been well documented. Hospitality businesses use customers' comment cards and online surveys to assess the overall satisfaction of their customers, while some companies hire consultant companies and/or individual secret shoppers to assess the real onsite quality of their services.

The products in hospitality and tourism industries include core products (the room for lodging; the meals for restaurants), supportive products (facilities and amenities, such as spa, pool, fitness centers, *etc.* for lodging; free bread for restaurants), and augmented products (the quality of services, the atmosphere and images of the companies). Every aspect of these three main types of products (core, supportive, and augmented) impacts guests' overall experience and satisfaction and should be measured accordingly. Hospitality and tourism-related businesses strive to stand out among their competitors. Effectively utilizing mystery shopper approaches can help to identify company status and customer preferences directly and indirectly. Functional facilities, timely assistance, spacious and easy-to-access amenities, cleanliness of the hotel room and/or restaurants, uniformed personnel and the overall design of the hotel rooms and/or restaurants all impact customer experience.

This research focused on the development of objective and reliable measures for the presented mystery shopper evaluation forms, testing the measurements through a pilot project at a selected restaurant that belongs to a well-known corporate restaurant chain, and integrating the results with senior executive team members and senior managers' feedback. We asked the shoppers to circle yes or no for each item during their visit based on each shopper's experience and observation. Some items could be evaluated objectively while other items could be judged subjectively. The original design of the measurement instrument covered all essential items at the casual/family-oriented restaurant and ended with a long comment section for each mystery shopper to summarize their thoughts concerning the overall dining experience. We agreed with the corporate team that adapting detailed rating questions followed by open-ended comment will be more convenient for more effective mystery shopper project implementation. The corporate executive members have taken action to motivate and develop service and management personnel by providing them with training and promotion opportunities. On another important note, researching competitors' strengths and weaknesses of service and product quality services by contracting consultants and or researchers to investigate what others are doing will yield trendy insights about what to do more or less of in each area, including exterior of the business site, hosting quality, service, product items, management, facility, and all related attributes that impact customers' loyalty and satisfaction as a whole.

It is important, that one of the advantages of a restaurant working with a university is indeed its cost effectiveness, and that future research could focus on the collaborative opportunities and benefits between academia and industry sectors. In summary, this study provides an example of how a company can work with an outside agency (consultant, academic institution, *etc.*) to develop a mystery-shopping program that can enhance and complement ongoing service quality programs. It also points to the important elements of the restaurant experience that should be measured and monitored, to improve the customer experience.

7. Limitations and Future Research

This project examined how secret shoppers' evaluation reports could draw the participating restaurant's attention to the importance of using secret shopping to ensure that the corporate office knows whether its standards are being upheld. A limited number of secret shoppers were recruited and the secret shopper project was conducted over the course of two weeks. Future research may consider covering a longer period of time to obtain a more objective picture regarding the service quality and any concerns that customers might experience on a regular basis. In terms of the reliability of the measurement scale used in the secret shopper reports, future studies may be more quantitative in nature and develop a more dynamic evaluation system that recruits secret shoppers from the participated restaurant's loyal customer list. Additionally, having a variety of secret shoppers investigate the customer services and food quality for a more objective overview will be very valuable to restaurant operations and quality assurance.

Acknowledgments

Author Contributions

Rachel JC Chen designed the secret shopper evaluation measurement, analyzed the data, and drafted the manuscript. Clayton Barrows provided literature reviews and made contributions to the overall suggestions. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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