



Make Extra Money: Become a Mystery Shopper

By TORY JOHNSON

July 2, 2008 —

Many people have heard of mystery shopping, but not all of us understand exactly what it's really about. Mystery shopping is focused on monitoring and improving service quality to ensure consistency with brand standards using anonymous resources. A growing trend involves home-based mystery shoppers who conduct their work by calling (as opposed to visiting) catalog companies, call centers and others, which accounts for 15 percent of the industry, according to trade group [Mystery Shopping Providers Association](#).

With mystery shopping, an individual walks into a retail, grocery or convenience store, a restaurant, or a gas station to measure specific behaviors and make certain observations. Among them: associate greetings, the length of time to be served, the availability of merchandise, the knowledge of the sales team, and so on.

Many companies request "shops" of their own locations as well as those of their competitors. It enables them to understand how their services stack up against the competition - both generally and in specific areas.

One hypothetical example: Mystery shopper assignments might measure the wait in line at Target versus Wal-Mart. A hypothetical assignment might also measure how much information a Best Buy sales associate in electronics knows about a specific digital camera, compared with the sales associate at Circuit City.

Another option involves merchandising, where you're charged with helping manufacturers and retailers present their product consistent with brand standards in a retail environment to generate sales. You may assemble displays, distribute coupons, sample food, restock shelves or demonstrate products. The needs and the skill levels vary; companies post opportunities for people to sample cheese in grocery stores and they also look for techies to demonstrate a new video camera during in-store promotional events.

In both cases - mystery shopping and merchandising - retailers don't hire shoppers or merchandisers directly; all of this is handled by a third-party vendor. You accept an assigned task and then to get paid you must prove that you've completed it, which is typically done by answering and submitting an online survey about the experience. You might also be required to take photographs of your work, specifically for merchandising assignments. It's all spelled out in advance before you agree to the work.

According to [Market Force](#), a nationwide leader in mystery shopping and merchandising among top brands, some of the requirements in the online questionnaire for a mystery shop may include:

- Were you greeted properly?
- Were all display items priced and in good condition?
- Were accessories priced and well stocked (no empty peg hooks)?

Getting started making money. Both mystery shopping and merchandising pay by the assignment. You work as an independent contractor, which means you work when you want, but work is never guaranteed.

Most mystery shopping assignments pay between \$8 and \$10. Merchandising is generally in the range of \$13 to \$18. Some assignments offer free meals and/or groceries either as a form of compensation or in addition to a small fee. More complex assignments pay more - up to \$30 or so per assignment. If you're being offered substantially more, that's a red flag and you should question the legitimacy of the assignment.

There are hundreds of companies throughout the country that hire shoppers and merchandisers. Some hire for both; others handle one or the other. Every shopper who told me she makes at least \$100 a week is registered with several companies and actively takes on several assignments per week. Some women I spoke with say they make upwards of \$500 a month because they're diligent about working at it.

Register with multiple companies because they all have different needs and they serve different clients. (If you live in a remote area without access to ample stores and restaurants, unfortunately your options are severely limited. Home-based "shops" might be best for you. Merchandising cannot be done from home.)

[Click here](#) for a listing of companies that offer mystery shopping and merchandising opportunities to independent contractors.

Details, details. Most companies critique your online application for proper spelling, grammar and punctuation, especially since your proof-of-completion reports are submitted in writing to the client. Poor spelling will knock you out of the running.

Pay attention to distance. Don't accept an assignment that pays \$10 if you have to drive 20 miles each way to complete the task. The gas will eat up your fee.

Think about bundling assignments. Pick a time - after work, early mornings while your kids are in school or on a weekend - and pack as many assignments into those timeslots as possible. Companies will alert you to restrictions, if any, on how many competitive events you can work at once.

Many assignments require you to monitor the exact time of specific tasks. If you're easily flustered and don't like to multitask, this probably isn't the right fit for you. You'll find many people who've tried this type of work and hated it. They complain it's tedious and time-consuming - not worth the minimal money they were paid.

Two trade associations offer extensive information on their respective industries. The [Mystery Shopping Providers Association](#) and the [National Association for Retail](#)

Marketing Services offer listings of legitimate companies and opportunities, a code of ethics guiding their industry and tips for success.

Avoid the scams. Many people are concerned about scams and rightly so, since they're everywhere in this space. Arm yourself with knowledge before getting started.

- Never pay to be a mystery shopper or merchandiser. No legitimate opportunity requires a fee. (The MSPA offers a certification process that is optional, not required, to get work.)
- Never get involved in check-cashing schemes. Legitimate opportunities will never require you to cash any checks as an assignment. If your assignment requires you to order a specific item in a restaurant, you'll have to front the cash, but with a receipt you'll be reimbursed.
- Never respond to unsolicited requests by phone, e-mail or mail to become a mystery shopper or merchandiser. Most likely a fee will be involved with promises to teach you the "secrets" of making big bucks with little effort. That "secret" is a lie: There's no way to make lots of money with minimal effort in these industries.

Tory Johnson is the Workplace Contributor on ABC's Good Morning America and the CEO of Women For Hire. Connect with her at www.womenforhire.com.

Copyright © 2008 ABC News Internet Ventures