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Original Scientific Paper

MYSTERY SHOPPING - A PROCESS OF UNDERSTANDING CONSUMERS, WHICH OPENS UP THE SPACE FOR CREATING CONTEMPORARY COMPETITIVE TRENDS

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Abstract

Successful entrepreneurs follow the trends in their business areas. There are people who create trends and people who understand trends. The rest are people who neither create nor understand trends.

It is interesting to note that businesses alone cannot create hot trends. They need to understand consumers and their needs in order to create a trend that will transform them into market leaders⁹. The Mystery shopping process focuses precisely on tracking the consumer experience, enabling it to draw parallels between the secret shopper's feedback on the one hand, and the purpose of the sales service on the other. During the Mystery shopping process, business promotion tips can also be found, which are ascertained by the consumer, i.e. the consumer experience.

In this way, each company will discover the current divergences between expectations and achievements, thereby opening up space for the application of contemporary competitive trends.

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the need for this type of research to our state-owned companies in order to advance sales, follow up and create trends.

Keywords: Mystery shopping, competing trends, Consumer

1. Introduction

Modern operating conditions have forced companies to take a proactive approach when entering the market, which means continuous research to monitor all changes that occur. The amount of information obtained often does not determine their quality. Hence, quality research is buried in order to obtain quality information that will be useful in decision making. Investments in such research are much smaller than the loss that can occur due to non-performance. In order to obtain information that will be useful in further operations, each company should constantly monitor and examine changes in the opinions, attitudes, values and lifestyle of consumers.

In order to improve the process of operation of companies, and at the same time to educate and motivate individuals, Mystery shopping has emerged as the most popular tool in marketing in recent years.

Based on the profile of the consumer that a certain company has reached through the conducted market research, this tool makes a profile of the so-called secret buyer through whom he conducts the whole procedure. Secret buyers through training are prepared on all the rules and guidelines that they should follow during the process, especially emphasizing the criteria, on the basis of which the quality of services of the company and / or its competitors will objectively be measured in detail.

This tool was first used in the 19th century, although it was used spontaneously and unprofessionally. In 1997, the MSPA - Mystery Shopping Providers Association was founded, which for the first time defined strict ethical rules and standards when applying the tool.

An effective Mystery shopper program addresses customer touch points and mirrors the way customers interact with brand.

Currently, there are four common types of Mystery shopping:

- in-Person Mystery Shopping
- Telephone Mystery Shopping
- Internet Mystery Shopping
- Multiple Touchpoint (Hybrid) Mystery Shopping

The fact that only 4% of consumers who are dissatisfied complain to companies, while the remaining 68% immediately leave for the rival company, is enough data to encourage companies to question themselves how they are viewed by consumers. The Mystery shopping tool is used by the companies that want to achieve and maintain a high level of quality of the services they provide, which is one of the most important criteria in the business process.

2. Theoretical framework

Defining the concept and the determination of methods of work

Mystery shopping is a tool that measures the quality of services in order to improve them, and thus increase sales. Secret buyers, with the help of pre-prepared training, are prepared and sent to the correct location, pretending to be real customers and according to a pre-set scenario, they analyze all the given criteria. Everything that can be part of a customer's shopping experience is measurable, so it can rightly be purported that the results of Mystery shopping are measurable and accurate. Secret buyers are not hired to find errors, but to report objectively on the whole situation that arises during the process of purchase. Hence, in order for a person to be chosen as a secret buyer, he must possess certain characteristics such as: objectivity, responsibility, honesty, patience, meticulousness, punctuality, flexibility, organizational skills, ability to remember, etc.

As a tool of Mystery shopping, it does not measure the success of sales, but the extent to which sellers adhere to previously left procedures by superiors. Hence, the subject of research is everything that affects the improvement of the service such as: the first contact with the seller; the appearance of the object; the kindness of the seller etc. As a kind of quantitative tool, it can be realized in ways as follows:

1. Primary mystery shopping - the secret buyer at a particular point of sale plays the role of an overly picky buyer who has a lot of questions.
2. Go shopping method - the agency recruits a target group to agree on a date for the purchase of certain products at a particular location. Among them is a secret buyer who participates in the whole process and secretly monitors the behavior of real consumers.
3. Secret recording - secret surveillance of consumers during the purchase with the help of audio or video recording devices.

In mystery shopping there are 2 methods that can be used to conduct research²:

1. Random method (by object) - this method requires at least 5 visits by secret buyers in one sales place. Although the method provides objective information about the point of sale, the information about employees cannot be obtained individually.
2. Employee method - this method requires at least 3 visits per employee and through it is obtained objective and measurable data on the quality of sales by each employee.

In order for this tool to give the expected results, it is necessary to fulfill several steps, namely: to identify what is important for consumers in the buying process so that clear standards can be set when providing the service; the company is then informed of the purpose of the tool to conduct testing of the respondents and to prepare a scenario for the visit; followed by the selection of secret buyers, then the organization, implementation, and control; and finally the reporting of the results.

3. Methodological framework and research discussion

Methodology

The results of the research conducted in the period from 03 to 29 October 2019, with a total of 44 visits of secret customers in the planned sales outlets XY will be presented. During the visits of the secret buyers, the following were examined: the general appearance of the outlet; the first contact with the employees of the department; the general service of the employees of the department; and the sales skills of the employees of the department. At each point of sale, three visits were made by secret buyers.

The visits were attended by 32 local secret buyers aged 22-48. The structure of secret buyers was aligned with the profile of regular customers at XY outlets. The results are shown in percentages (%) which represent an index of fulfillment of the set level of the standard for providing customer service. The service level standards can be seen from the following:

- $90\% \geq 100\%$ - High results according to the world quality standard. Standards need to be maintained at this level.
- $50\% > 90\%$ - Satisfactory intermediate results. It is necessary to invest additional funds and time to raise the level of quality.
- $0\% \geq 50\%$ - Low results, corrective action is needed immediately.

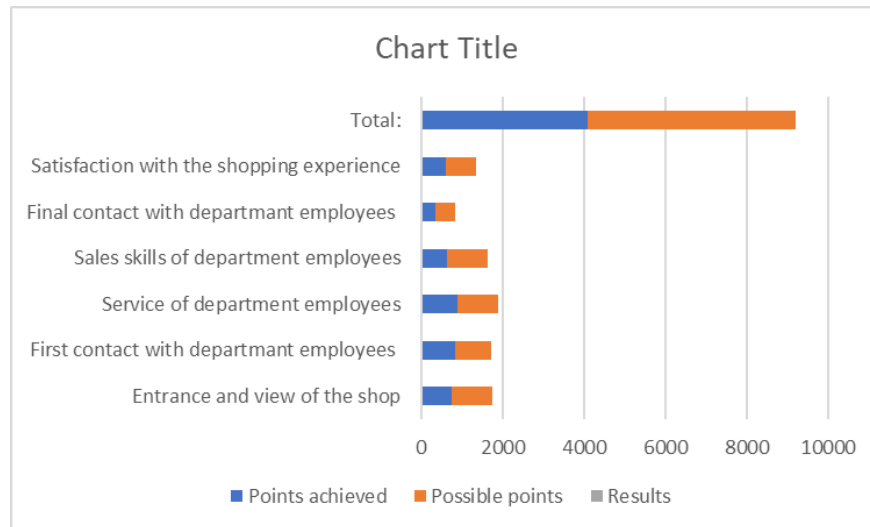
The total score of the category is the percentage of the achieved points from the total possible points. Each positive answer (YES) is scored with 5 points while the negative (NO) answer is scored with 0 points. All questions that could not be checked / examined in the given situation are answered with inappropriateness and they are not considered during the scoring.

Description

The following is an overview of the results obtained from the conducted research in all 6 categories, total sum up by categories and compared by locations. After each graph, a comment is given, i.e. analysis of the obtained results, and at the end of the research, recommendations for future improvement are given.

Category	Points achieved	Possible points	Results
Entrance and view of the shop	764	984	77,64%
First contact with employees			
according to department	825	897	91,97%
Service of department employees			
	902	995	90,65%
Sales skills of department employees			
	652	986	66,12%
Final contact with employees			
according to department	342	502	68,13%
Satisfaction with the shopping experience	610	755	80,79%
Total:	4095	5119	79,99%

Source: Author's own research



Source: Author's own research

The total result achieved in this research is 79.99% which is in the framework of average results, is realized by 32 secret buyers, in the period from 03 to 29 October, who have made a total of 44 meetings in the stores provided. High score with over 90% is marked in two categories: first contact with department employees (91.97%); and service of department employees (90.65%). The lowest score was not recorded in any category, while the lowest score of 66.12% was recorded in the Sales Skills category of the employees according to department.

More priorities, deficiencies and parts for urgent improvement have been identified in the research process.

In the category of priorities the followings are identified:

- In XY stores, secret buyers recognized products that had been in promotion.
- In XY's outlets, the products on display in the departments visited by secret shoppers were clean.
- In XY sales outlets there were prices respectively marked for each product in the departments visited by secret buyers.
- In XY sales outlets there were features respectively marked for each product in the departments visited by secret buyers.
- Employees of the department, when they started communicating with secret buyers, addressed them with: "Hi, how can we help you?".
- Employees of the department wore appropriate uniforms.
- Department employees looked clean and tidy.
- The employees of the department were polite during the communication with the secret buyers.
- The employees of the department looked the secret buyers in the eye during the communication.
- After the secret buyers had informed the employees of the department about their wishes, they presented at least one product that met their needs / desires.
- Employees of the department were thanked or greeted by secret buyers upon departure.

In the category of deficiencies are:

- In XY sales outlets, promotional materials had not always been placed in a prominent place.
- At the moment when the secret buyers arrived, there were not always employees in the department.
- Employees of the department had not always been cordial when secret buyers approached them.
- Employees of the department had not always kept an inscription with their name.

- Secret buyers had not always had the care of employees during communication.
- Employees of the department had not always clearly and comprehensibly answered questions from secret buyers.
- Employees of the department had not always been patient in explaining the characteristics of the product.
- Employees of the department had not always asked secret buyers questions, to identify their needs.
- Employees of the department had not always explained the characteristics of the products to secret buyers.
- The employees of the department had not always informed the secret buyers which campaigns are currently in progress and what are their benefits.
- Employees of the department had not always had a proactive approach during the conversation with secret buyers.

In the category for urgent improvement are:

- Employees of the department have not provided additional products / services to secret buyers.
- Employees of the department did not inform the secret buyers on their own initiative about the product warranty.
- Employees of the department did not inform the secret buyers on their own initiative about the delivery of the product.
- The employees of the department did not inform the secret buyers on their own initiative about the payment methods.
- Employees of the department during the greeting with secret buyers on the way out did not use any of the following phrases: "We hope to see you again", "We look forward to your next visit", "Thank you for visiting".

4. Conclusion

Mystery shopping is a great marketing tool that can be used to find out if the efforts and investments of superiors / owners have positive effects on the interaction of employees with customers and potential customers.

Given that employees give the initial and most important image that customers have of an organization, only in this way can the impact of the marketing intervene in creating the opinion of customers, i.e. marketing of the company itself can be assessed³.

With the help of Mystery shopping, as an effective tool for perceiving and evaluating the perception that customers have of the company, management acquires a clear picture of the elements of employees in a given organization, which should be rewarded, improved, and further maintained on high level, but at the same time for the shortcomings, on the basis of which an action plan can be drawn up and accordingly, to introduce corrective measures for their improvement, which in turn will lead to multiple improvement of the results of the whole company. The recommendations and tips that represent the final stage in this project are vital. Therefore, companies need to carefully analyze and monitor future decisions.

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