

# Mystery shoppers work other side of retail counter

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Thursday, February 22, 2007

**By ABIGAIL LEICHMAN**  
**STAFF WRITER**

Every day, undercover customers secretly check up on tellers and other employees at Commerce Bank's 440 branches, including 40 in New Jersey.

"We thought we were delivering a great customer experience, but we wanted to make sure, so in 2000 we started hiring folks to measure our performance," said Linda Vero, the bank's executive vice president for retail operations.

More than 750 American companies, from hotels to pet stores, cruise lines to gas stations -- even the U.S. Postal Service -- use "mystery shoppers" to evaluate how they're doing.

"Just about every national chain establishment in your neighborhood is mystery-shopped monthly or weekly," writes Ilisha Newhouse in "Mystery Shopping Made Simple" (McGraw-Hill, 2004). "Some fast-food restaurants are mystery-shopped three times a day."

Everybody knows employees will be at their best when corporate honchos visit. The question is how they perform for Mr. and Ms. Consumer.

"Our [mystery] shoppers are literally the demographic of the market we serve," said Vero. "We have nuns, schoolteachers, retirees, married couples."

There's even a new mystery-shopping venture studying how employees at stores across the country interact with customers who have disabilities.

Getting into the biz

Despite popular belief, mystery shoppers don't earn much -- usually less than \$20 plus a small allowance if a purchase is required.

But if you're itching to get into it anyway, don't call the establishment you want to mystery-shop. Instead, you must register with agencies that screen applicants and schedule secret visits for clients like Commerce.

Steer clear of those that try to lure you through a newspaper ad or a bulk e-mail. ("Grade your favorite store and you could get \$1,000!!") And be wary of any that charge a fee.

The Federal Trade Commission warns not to use Web sites that offer to sell you a list of mystery-shopping agencies, noting that agency contact information is available free on the Internet. Books like Newhouse's list hundreds of them.

"If it costs money, it's a scam," said Newhouse, a co-founder of the National Coalition of Mystery Shoppers.

She's probably right. On the assumption that for-profit sites could save me time and effort by providing direct links to lots of secret-shopper applications, I registered at shoppingjobshere.com for \$24.95 and used its list to sign up with three schedulers that did not ask for my Social Security number (many do, for tax purposes).

The same afternoon, one of them sent an e-mail offering a mystery-shop at a sunglasses store in Paramus. They've contacted me consistently ever since; I've never heard from the other two.

My son in Queens registered at secretshoppingcenter.com for \$39.97. I wanted to see the difference between the two sites and between jobs offered to men and women in the two states. But first his registration wasn't acknowledged and then his log-in and password didn't work. A series of e-mails from "Tim" promised to fix things. So far, no go.

Meantime, he signed on with one scheduling agency directly (for free) and quickly received job offers.

Too bad most of them were in Albany and Alabama.

Problems can occur even on the agency level. "I did several hotels for one company, and they took 90 days to pay me, while the average is 60," recalled Newhouse. When the check finally arrived, it bounced.

Some of the Web sites that sell lists also offer \$50 shopper certification programs that the FTC calls "almost always worthless."

But in competitive markets such as the New York area, Newhouse said, certifications sometimes do provide an edge.

Whichever way you land a shopping gig, you'll have to fill out forms and read a lot of fine print.

Newhouse noted that many potential mystery shoppers balk at the personal questions on application forms. But there's a reason for the pointed queries.

"They need to know your demographics," she said. "If you have kids, they'll send you to Toys R Us; if you're male they'll send you to an ESPN sports bar, so you'll blend in. There are secure locks on these questionnaires, and they're very professional."

Many scheduling agencies require you to have a PayPal account in which to deposit your fee. They all require you to submit, on a tight deadline, a detailed report about your shopping (or dining, banking, entertainment or travel) experience.

You need a flexible schedule, a great memory, an eye for detail and excellent time-management and writing skills.

"Mystery shopping is not a match for everyone, and it will not make you rich," Newhouse cautions. "However, it provides ... an alternative to working within the corporate machine" and is an activity stay-at-home moms can do with children in tow.

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