

Mystery shoppers keep employees on their toes

Practice presents opportunity to sharpen skills

BY DANÉE ATTEBURY

Staff Writer

When Jonathan Register forgot to ask a Bruster's Real Ice Cream customer to come back again, he missed an opportunity in mid-July to earn \$150.

The 17-year-old ice cream scooper had just been mystery shopped. Mystery shoppers are paid customers who evaluate their experience so managers can monitor their employees' performance.

Bruster's employees who get a perfect score of 100 from a mystery shopper receive \$100 from owner Ed Miller and a \$50 Visa gift card from Bruster's corporate headquarters and a certificate. They also are entered into Bruster's national drawing to win a \$1,250 gift card.

Register said he feels disappointed that he got a score of 95 from the mystery shopper. Bruster's employees always must ask customers to return to the store in the future. "Sometimes you get busy and forget to ask them to come back," he said.

Miller said Bruster's corporate headquarters sends mystery shoppers to both Bruster's locations in Columbus three times a month during the stores' peak season, April through September.

Mystery shoppers evaluate their customer service experience on a form immediately after being served, Miller said, and employees stay on their toes because they know any customer could be a mystery shopper. "They never know who it's going to be," he said.

Bruster's uses the Norcross-based mystery shopping company Shop'n Chek. The company's director of client services, Emily Kehrberg, said mystery shoppers must go through an application process that includes a 25-word statement of interest. "If it's 26 words, it shows is you're not detail-oriented," she said.

Potential mystery shoppers also are screened to make sure they don't have a bias for or against an industry they might mystery shop. If applicants or their relatives have worked in a particular industry, those applicants cannot mystery shop that industry, Kehrberg said.

Miller said Bruster's corporate office, not individual stores, pays for mystery shoppers. Kehrberg said the terms are confidential between Shop'N Chek and Bruster's. The cost varies from business to business, she said.

About incentives

Even Miller does not know how much it costs to use mystery shoppers. "It's not cheap, from what I've heard."

Miller said he considers mystery shopping more of an incentive program and a learning experience than a form of punishment. "We use it as a coaching tool," he said. And his employees really want that \$150.

"They like that jingle in their pockets, believe me. They get excited about that," he said.

He considers a bad score anything below an 80 but rarely sees scores below 90. However, employees who get a low score will hear from Miller. "I have had to counsel and give some pretty strong warnings," he said.

The main downside to mystery shopping is that occasionally the shoppers are not accurate in their evaluations, Miller said. One time a mystery shopper gave an employee an imperfect score for not wearing a name tag, but the store's cameras showed that the employee was in fact wearing his name tag. Miller couldn't change the score.

Mystery shoppers have to evaluate their entire customer service experience based on memory and may forget small details, Miller said. Still, he said he would recommend mystery shopping to other businesses because a perfect score is such a motivating incentive for employees.

Register got a perfect score from a mystery shopper in April, he said, and he spent the incentive money on gas for his car and two purses for his girlfriend.

He said he felt proud of himself and can't wait to get mystery shopped again.

BRUSTER'S

REAL ICE CREAM

Owners: Ed and Marie Miller

Addresses: 3465 Macon Road, 1654 Whittlesey Road

Number of employees: 50, mostly part-time

Opened: Whittlesey Road store in December 2002,

Macon Road store in April 2004

Phone numbers: 706-568-3380

706-320-0755

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