

mystery shopping

how to earn pocket
money as a mystery
shopper in Australia

information, tips, and paying markets

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Table of contents

Introduction	...5
What do mystery shoppers do?	...6
Pay rates	...8
What qualities do you need?	...9
General tips on getting assignments	...11
Is mystery shopping for you?	...13
Australian mystery shopping markets	...14
Cheers Business Solutions	...14
Fieldnet Mystery Shopping	...15
Fieldwork Sydney Pty Ltd (formerly C&R Research)	...15
GAPBuster	...16
Hoed	...16
INcognito	...16
Market Pulse	...17
Mystery Shopper	...17
Mystery Shopping	...17
The Realise Group	...18
Shop'n Chek	...18
Shopper Anonymous	...18
Spectre (Market Equity)	...19
SpySee	...19
Other companies	...19

Introduction

Do you have free time, a reliable car, internet access, a keen eye and a love of shopping? If so, you might be ready to join the secret army of mystery shoppers around Australia.

Mystery shopping is also known as 'secret shopping', 'professional shopping', or the jargonistic 'customer perception surveying'. It's a huge industry in the US, where good customer service is recognised as a principle factor in business success, and is gradually gaining popularity here in Australia.

Being a mystery shopper is a fantastic way for people with spare time to earn a little extra money, while it's flexible enough to put on hold while you go on holiday or are too busy to participate for a time. Best of all, you can pick and choose which assignments you want to do.

This publication will give you information on what is expected of a mystery shopper and what kind of work you'll be doing, tips on how to do well and get more assignments, and, best of all, links to lots of Australian mystery shopping companies where you can sign up and get started today!

What do mystery shoppers do?

Mystery shoppers are employed by market research companies to act as customers in a wide range of customer-oriented industries, including but not limited to clothes stores, restaurants and bars, petrol stations, travel agents, cinemas, tyre stores, jewellery stores, foreign exchanges and banks, hairdressers, sports stores, and car dealerships.

It's probable that you are already familiar with and even use many of the companies you might be asked to visit as a mystery shopper: Domino's Pizza, Susanne's clothing store, Commonwealth Bank, AmEx, Hoyts movies, Just Cuts, the Body Shop, Myer, KFC, Hungry Jacks and so on, are all companies I have done mystery shops for.

The mystery shopper visits the assigned store at the assigned time and date and carries out some or all of the following tasks:

- Observation of the store or restaurant layout and product display;
- Evaluation of the way the staff handles an inquiry and/or purchase in terms of customer service, speed, upselling and cross-selling, and other criteria;
- Assessment of whether staff are complying with management requirements such as uniform, promotional messages, food handling, maintenance and signage; and/or
- Checking of product ranges and prices for compliance with data stamping and recommended pricing.

One of the most important things mystery shoppers must be is utterly objective, evaluating the company on what they are seeing right then on that visit, rather than thinking back to other experiences or second-guessing how they think staff members should be behaving.

Most of the time, the work is done completely anonymously, though occasionally you will be asked to reveal yourself at the end of the visit; this is most common when a financial transaction was undertaken and it must be immediately cancelled.

The mystery shopper then fills out a questionnaire on what they saw and experienced, and faxes it, submits it via email, data enters it online, or posts it back to the market research company by the due date.

Questionnaires are subject to quality-checking such as receipts or the inclusion of questions relating to the physical location or appearance of the store to ensure the mystery shopper visited the right location.

The information from the questionnaire is collated and forwarded to the retail company so they can evaluate how their staff members are performing in customer service and sales performance. The retail store is usually a national chain, and many questionnaires are returned from many shoppers nationwide assessing all or most of their stores during the evaluation timeframe. This is why the deadline for questionnaire returns is so important.

That's really all you have to do as a mystery shopper: be at the designated place at the right time, make observations, and get it back to the company. Pretty easy, isn't it?

Of course, every assignment will be different, and the requirements for evaluating a clothing store, for example, are different from assessing a fast food restaurant. But that's what keeps mystery shopping varied and fun.

Pay rates

Mystery shopping should be treated as way to earn pocket money rather than as a replacement for a mainstream job. Depending on the assignment, pay can be a little as \$5 for a phone call or \$10-15 for a visit to the store. The pay rate increases for more complex mystery shops, but so does the time commitment. Some of these types of jobs can earn you as much as \$50-60.

The pay is also irregular, as you will never receive the same number of assignments from month to month. One month you may receive five assignments and earn \$100, the next, only one for \$10. Some months you will not receive any assignments at all. Mystery shopping cannot be relied upon as a regular income.

You will be reimbursed for any sanctioned purchases you make, as well as for phone calls, either directly for the exact amount spent, with an extra flat payment on top of the assignment pay rate for about or a little more than the amount you are expected to spend, or factored into the assignment pay rate.

Payment is usually made via direct deposit to your bank account, though some companies will still send a monthly cheque. Sometimes you will receive some money in advance to make a required purchase, though usually you'll need to pay for it yourself and have it reimbursed.

For non-consumable items such as a small clothing item, you must return it and your receipt to the marketing company to be reimbursed. However, consumable items, including food, movie tickets and movie treats, and haircuts, become a perk of the job. Be aware, though, that if you buy something not in the brief, you will not be reimbursed. Clothes and shoe stores can be dangerous in this case!

What qualities do you need?

The most important qualities to possess as a mystery shopper are reliability and the ability to read and follow instructions. The marketing companies want, above all else, the questionnaires returned on or before the due date and filled out correctly. Therefore the absolutely best quality you can prove that you have is reliability.

Good written communication skills, including good spelling and grammar, are a useful skill for filling out the questionnaires and is probably the second most looked-for ability that the mystery shopping companies will want. That doesn't mean you have to be fancy with your writing, just that they don't have to spend too much time correcting your errors and typos before letting their clients see your comments.

Observation skills, an eye for details, and a good memory are helpful in completing the assignments since obviously you can't bring the instructions to the store with you or fill out the questionnaire on the spot.

Obviously comprehension skills and the ability to follow instructions is very useful too. The ability to be both objective and fair is another good quality to have. While you might assume companies want to catch their staff members doing things wrong, they're often more interested in what they're doing right too, so including positives as well as negatives is a good thing to do.

Flexibility is also key. Assignments can be required to be carried out at any time, including evenings and weekends. The more available you are, the more assignments you will receive, particularly if you prove yourself reliable in picking up emergency or last-minute mystery shops.

This does not mean, however, that you can't be a mystery shopper if you work full-time in the city, as many mystery shops are assigned over lunchtime in the CBD. However, mystery shopping is more generally suited to stay-at-home parents, students, and retired people.

Your ability to be unobtrusive and act just as you normally would is also obviously important since assignments are meant to be carried out without the staff members realising they are being evaluated.

This is to make sure they treat all customers well, not just those they know are reporting on their behaviour.

Many, if not most, marketing companies email out the assignments and expect questionnaires to be data-entered and submitted online. Therefore you will need regular internet access and to be comfortable with online use. You may also need access to a fax machine and/or scanner to be able to send off reports or copies of receipts.

A car is not strictly necessary, but the lack of one substantially limits the assignments you can accept and also makes the time commitment more than pay rate is worth. You should consider your options carefully if you do not have access to a car. You can always nominate just your own suburb, which will work well if you happen to have a major shopping centre located in it.

Marketing companies are always particularly looking for people who live in regional areas to carry out country mystery shops, smokers to buy cigarettes, and people who wear glasses to visit optometrists. Also, since most mystery shoppers are women, men are often wanted for certain assignments, such as to men's clothes stores. Some are also looking for certain age ranges.

General tips on getting assignments

The marketing firm will usually accept your application, including times you are available and suburbs you are prepared to visit, and send you a sample assignment to do. Once this is completed and evaluated, they will put you on their books, where you may wait for some months before you receive an assignment.

To stand out from other applicants and raise yourself up the rotation, emphasize your communication skills, flexibility, and eagerness to participate in your application. Make sure everything is spelled right and be honest about your availability! Do the sample assignment, if there is one, to the best of your ability – it's not just for the marketing company to see how you do, but for you to see if mystery shopping is really your cup of tea.

When you do start receiving assignments, accept all you are offered if you can, particularly any that are short-notice, as this will really help out the mystery shopping company and earn you major brownie points.

Make sure you follow the instructions for the assignment carefully, paying particular attention that you are visiting the correct store at the correct time. Especially with chain stores in the city centre, it can be easy to visit the wrong one, so always double-check the address.

During the mystery shop, do your best to fulfil all the criteria of the assignment, which can include asking for certain items or upgrades, observing signs and name-badges and remembering display locations. It may seem quite hard your first few times due to how much you have to remember.

By the way, your mobile phone can come in very handy, as you can quietly SMS a few key points to yourself that will help jog your memory later, without being as conspicuous as pulling out pen and paper. You can also have a few instructions texted to yourself and left in your phone Inbox for you to consult should you become stuck for what you were supposed to look for...

Depending on the nature of the mystery shop, you can always pop back a little later to make a note of something you missed the first time round, such as signage.

Fill out the questionnaire neatly and with informative and objective observations. The more specific and detailed observations you can make, the more useful it is to the company. The better you do with this, the more assignments you will receive.

Remember that while mystery shopping is a fun shopping experience for you, it's a vital feedback loop for the people paying you to do it. Take it as seriously as the retail and marketing companies do and you will soon be a favoured mystery shopper.

Is mystery shopping for you?

You should re-consider becoming a mystery shopper if:

- You don't like talking to salespeople and aren't confident in role-playing.
- You don't like obtaining quotes and then having to field follow-up calls and saying 'no'.
- You have an unpredictable time schedule and won't be available when you say you will be.
- Your written English skills (spelling and grammar) are not up to a good standard.
- You have a particularly bad memory or become flustered easily.
- You expect mystery shopping to replace a full-time job or to be a reliable income.

Remember, you can always turn down mystery shopping assignments you don't feel comfortable doing, while still being available to do others. However, the more successful assignments you complete, the more likely you are to be called for more.

Many of the mystery shopping websites you are about to visit emphasise one thing over and over again: you are not their employee, but a contractor. So you are not entitled to any benefits, including things like paid leave, superannuation or worker's compensation. Treat mystery shopping as an interesting hobby, not as a job, and you'll be fine.

Australian mystery shopping markets

Listed on the following pages are Australian marketing companies who carry out mystery shopping. This is not an exhaustive list but it does outline the companies who are easiest to get work from. As this is a growing industry, more companies should become available as time goes on.

There are also international companies claiming to want Australian shoppers. However, these do not yield the results that registering with Australian mystery shopping companies do. Therefore they are not included on this list. There is also some risk of being scammed by some companies, though not the ones listed here. Be very wary of any mystery shopping sites that, one, claim you can make thousands, and/or, two, want you to pay them anything!

Some mystery shoppers companies prefer you not be registered with more than one; others prefer you to have had mystery shopping experience. Although you might want to register with as many as you can, you will soon find only a few yield regular jobs that suit you or that pay well enough to make it worth your while.

In each case, I have tried to provide the direct link for applying, but I advise you to take some time to look around their site and see what information they have for their shoppers before you apply. In particular, consult their Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) page if they have one. Such research will both help you make a more targeted application and to decide if they are a company you'd like to work with.

The most important thing to remember: have fun with it! It's just shopping, after all...

Cheers Business Solutions

<http://www.cheersbusinesssolutions.com.au>

Assignments are emailed out and are assigned to the first appropriate person to respond. Therefore, supply an email address you check often. Questionnaires are submitted online.

How to apply: Sign up online using the link from the main homepage. You will be contacted and sent a trial mystery shop assignment.

http://www.cheersbusinesssolutions.com.au/index.php?pg_id=5

Fieldnet Mystery Shopping

<http://www.fieldnet.com.au/index.asp>

This company assigns jobs via email and the first appropriate person to respond gets the job. Therefore, supply an email address you check often. Questionnaires are submitted online.

How to apply: Sign up online.

<http://www.fieldnet.com.au/register.asp>

Fieldwork Sydney Pty Ltd (formerly C&R Research)

<http://www.sydney.fieldwork.com>

<http://www.crresearch.com.au/>

The website does not currently allow signing up online and applications, assignments and questionnaires must therefore be communicated by mail (envelopes are supplied for the return of questionnaires).

How to apply: You should be able to apply online eventually (a link to 'employment opportunities' exists but is not currently active). Until then, send your contact details and a short letter outlining your availability, suburbs you are prepared to visit, and your skills and experiences that may aid you as a mystery shopper to:

Fieldwork Sydney Pty Ltd
5/60 Macquarie St
Parramatta NSW 2150

Make sure to mark on the envelope that it contains a mystery shopper application.

GAPBuster

<http://www.gapbuster.com.au/>

This company allows signing-up online and appears to be one of the more Australia-based international companies. However, the job assignment is likely to be lower than with the true Australian companies.

How to apply: Sign up online.

http://www.gapbuster.com/xec/Default.aspx?cp=CC000818_frontright

Hoed

<http://www.hoed.com.au/hoed/>

Assignments are assigned online or by phone. You will receive an email if you have jobs assigned online letting you know you should log-on to their website to get the details. Note that unlike other companies, you do not log-on to accept a job – it is assumed you have accepted and are able to do the assignment unless you notify them otherwise. Therefore they need to know your up-to-date availability details. Questionnaires are submitted online or by phone. They supply a Reply Paid address to submit hardcopy timesheets and receipts. Envelopes are supplied for the return of other items. This is a well-organised and highly professional company.

How to apply: Sign up online. You will be contacted and sent a trial mystery shop assignment.

<http://www.hoed.com.au/hoed/shopper/apply/>

INcognito

<http://www.incognito.com.au/index.htm>

This is a WA-based company servicing WA and NT only at the moment, though shoppers in other states are asked to email their contact details for future work opportunities.

How to apply: Make an application online and you will be contacted.

http://www.incognito.com.au/join_incognito.htm

Market Pulse

<http://www.marketpulse.com.au/mplbiz/default.html>

This company assigns jobs and notifies the recipient they have jobs to accept or decline by email or phone. Questionnaires are submitted online. Note this company has been disorganised in the past, making the mystery-shopper's job more difficult, but they are improving.

How to apply: Sign up online.

<http://www.payme4shopping.com/>

Mystery Shopper

<http://www.mysteryshopper.com.au>

This company gives out jobs solely by email and the first person to log on and accept gets the assignment. Therefore, you should give them an email address you check often. Make sure you read the assignment details thoroughly before accepting. Questionnaires are submitted online. This is an easy company with which to get some experience with mystery shopping but their pay rates are generally lower than the other companies.

How to apply: Sign up online.

http://www.mysteryshopper.com.au/shoppers_joinup.asp

Mystery Shopping

<http://www.mysteryshopping.com.au/>

Assignments are emailed out and are assigned to the first appropriate person to respond. Therefore, supply an email address you check often. Questionnaires are submitted online. Note the

website is very bandwidth-intensive so you are likely to find data entry extremely slow and frustrating unless you have broadband or a lot of patience.

How to apply: Sign up online.

<http://www.mysteryshopping.com.au/?page=register>

The Realise Group

<http://www.therealisegroup.com.au/rnew/frame.html>

Assignments are allocated via email and the shopper must respond to accept (or decline). Note Australian shoppers require an ABN but this is free and easy to obtain.

How to apply: Sign up online.

<http://www.therealisegroup.com.au/rnew/MSregio.html>

Shopín Chek

<http://www.shopnchek.com.au/>

Assignment are allocated via email and viewed online.

How to apply: Sign up online.

<http://www.becomeashopper.com.au/>

Shopper Anonymous

<http://www.shopperanonymous.com/>

You will need an ABN to work with this group. You will be provided with log-in access to the team website to view assignments.

How to apply: Sign up online.

<http://www.shopperanonymous.com/index.php?id=308>

Spectre (Market Equity)

<http://www.spectre.com.au/spectre/default.htm>

Currently recruiting assessors but assignments are limited. This should improve with time.

How to apply: Sign up online.

<http://www.spectre.com.au/spectre/become.asp>

SpySee

<http://www.spyseebiz.com.au/>

As with many of the other companies, assignments are sent out by email and submitted online.

How to apply: Sign up online.

<http://prophetb1.archondev.com/SpySee/shoppers.nsf/InternalNavFrameset?OpenFrameSet&Frame=WorkspaceFrame&Src=%2FSpySee%2Fshoppers.nsf%2Fshopperapp%3FOpenForm%26AutoFramed>

Other companies

The following companies carry out mystery shopping but do not call for mystery shoppers on their web page. However, it is worth emailing or calling them and asking them how to become a mystery shopper for them, if you want more opportunities than those listed above.

Eldred Hospitality

<http://www.eldtrain.com.au/default.htm>

Click on 'Consulting and professional services' on the right-hand side of the homepage, then scroll down to click on 'Measuring customer perceptions of your business' on the resulting page.

Feedback?

Your comments, corrections and questions are welcome:
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