



MYSTERY SHOPPING RESEARCH - SEEING THE COMPANY'S PERFORMANCE THROUGH THE EYES OF THE CUSTOMERS

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Abstract

Businesses are thought and seen at first only through the eyes of the owner-manager. But, inevitably, a company that wants to perform must re-evaluate its business from the customer's point of view. A „Mysterious Client” study is only one of many pragmatic approaches.

This article aims to present the results of a Mystery Shopping research that was conducted in Iasi - one of the most important cities of Romania. We have observed six different stores using fifteen different persons - mysterious clients - in order to analyse the performance of each store. The results of this qualitative research can be presented to the managers as the exact opinions of some clients that have really benefited from the services provided and are able to evaluate the quality of these services.

Keywords: mystery shopping, company's performance, qualitative research

JEL classification: M12, M30, M31

1. INTRODUCTION

This present research shows a two weeks' monitoring, in different times of the day – in order to depict facts as accurate as possible – of the quality of services provided by the contact personnel. In order to evaluate the situations that are as similar as possible to the daily ones, we implemented a „Mystery Shopping” programme.

The purpose of this study consists in determining the perceptions and opinions of a number of well chosen individuals who evaluate, as objective as possible, certain aspects, which are to be included in an evaluation form. For the evaluation to be valid, it is a must for all the mystery-shoppers to share the same common set of premises, acquired in ad-

vance, and at the end of their visit, to fill in the evaluation forms in less than five minutes after leaving the store.

Targeted domain: services. Why services? Because it is a special, dynamic and very flexible domain to produce and sell products (in this case, services), and this depends on the high quality of one's performance in front of the customer. At the same time, taking into account the result of this study, a shop manager that offers services, is more flexible in decision-making. Therefore, any new information that emerges at some point can generate much easier a decisional process that can reduce the time to examine and materialize the decision.

Domain: mobile phone services, one of the three main mobile phone service providers: Orange, Vodafone, Cosmote.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In practice for decades, mystery shopping has been gaining in popularity. The literature, especially on line, is very rich in explaining why a mystery shopping research is very much recommended for various businesses (Seats, 2010). Laura Livers said that you can find if your salespeople are proficient in explaining and demonstrating your products or services (Livers, 1999). It can increase sales and improve service. Used as a benchmark, mystery shopping can pinpoint strengths and weaknesses for training operations and policy refinements (Leeds, 1996). The results help firms to become proactive about compliances. Mystery shopping can bring managers at all levels and front-line employees in touch with customer needs and perspectives (Goldsmith, 1997). Moreover, it seems that sharing long-term results builds the team (Baum, 1998). It makes them feel part of the team and lets them know that the company's objectives are achievable, showing their role in the big picture.

Mystery shopping is common in the business-to-consumer area, with shoppers evaluating and monitoring customer service across all types of industries. On the business-to-business side, mystery shopping has only been adopted recently but its use is increasing (Hynd, 2009).

You can use more research methods to obtain the information you need. So you can combine a survey (quantitative research) with a mystery shopper approach (a qualitative research). Maritz Research used a phone interview questionnaire and mystery shopping together to measure customer satisfaction in the quick-service (fast-food) restaurant industry (Narsh, 2002). Narsh says that mystery shopping is a great operations tool. But when paired with customer satisfaction research, it becomes an even better performance improvement tool. In our case, we have combined this technique with an interview conducted with the managers of those store that have been visited by our "spies" in order to see how do they value the information offered by us. So, we have observed that an announced survey is more trustworthy for them than an unannounced one.

Because these kinds of studies are so important for businesses, there are many associations like Mystery Shopping Providers Association (MSPA) or National Association of Mystery Shoppers (NAMS) which are showing the way mystery shopping can improve a business.

3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Objective: Two weeks' evaluation of the quality of the services provided to customers by the personnel hired in six of the stores involved in this domain of activity. The areas of interest in this evaluation are:

O1: the physical aspects of the location (cleanliness – both indoor, as well as outdoor; display of some promotional items – like posters, for example)

O2: the quality of the services provided

O3: the amiability of the sales consultants

O4: the efficiency and competence of the personnel

O5: the degree in which the personnel promotes certain products and services

Hypothesis: Starting from the objectives agreed from the beginning with the shop managers, we identified a set of hypothesis desired to be experimented by this study. These hypotheses are as follows:

Starting with the Objective no. 1:

H1: There is a connection between the cleanliness of the store and the time spent in the store.

H2: There is a connection between the cleanliness of the store and the friendly or hostile environment within the store.

H3: There is a connection between cleanliness of the store and the overall evaluation of the visit.

Starting with the Objective no. 2:

H4: There is a connection between the sales consultants' identification of their customers' needs and the customers' willingness to return to the same store.

H5: There is a connection between the sales consultants' behavior and their knowledge about the products/services.

H6: There is a connection between the presentation of the characteristics of the products, seen as benefits for the customers and the overall evaluation of the store.

Starting with the Objective no. 3:

H7: There is a connection between the way of receiving the customers and the evaluation of the sales consultant's competence.

H8: There is a connection between the way of receiving the customers and the time spent in the store.

H9: There is a connection between the way of approaching a customer (friendly or less friendly) and the overall evaluation of the visit.

Starting with the Objective no. 4:

H10: There is a connection between the time spent in the store and the customers' taking into consideration of the products offered to them as benefits.

H11: There is a connection between the time spent in the store and the sales consultant's effort in convincing the customer – as the customer estimated this effort.

H12: There is a connection between the sales consultant's attitude and the evaluation of the store's environment.

Starting with the Objective no. 5:

H13: There is a connection between the sales consultant's promotion of the current offer and the evaluation of his/ her behaviour.

H14: There is a connection between the sales consultant's promotion of the current offer and the identification of the customer's needs.

H15: There is a connection between the sales consultant's promotion of the current offer and the overall evaluation of the visit.

Method: A qualitative “Mystery Shopping” study.

“Mystery Shopping” is a research based on the accurate registration of what usually happens in the store/ location aimed. It has to avoid the investigator’s subjective perceptions and opinions regarding the main aspects that have to be taken into consideration. (Mudil et al, 1999, 112) can be achieved only by a direct evaluation form which contains concrete aspects, structured on themes (Park et al, 2010, 437).

A “Mystery Shopping” study was performed in each of the six targeted stores. In achieving it, the following restrictions were taken into consideration (Mattila, 2008):

- The persons selected as mystery-shoppers. These persons have to have certain abilities required by the role given:
 - a) to be well organized, in order to be able to plan the visits according to the imposed time schedule and to deliver the reports in time;
 - b) to be good observers in order to be able to answer all the questions in the questionnaire;
 - c) to be good narrators in order to be able to describe the visits they made;
 - d) to be brief (they must describe the visits, but avoiding the insignificant details);
 - e) to be objective (the report will describe the visit and not the mystery-shopper's opinion).

Fifteen different persons were selected to present the same scenario. An important detail was the performance of the people selected. In order that the selected persons to be as closer as possible to the profile required by the client, based on the consumer’s profile description, both men and women were chosen, but still, more men under 35 years old; in most cases, the consumer is married and has a constant income, but the end-users for whom this consumer is buying, are, in a large proportion, single.

- Assigning the locations which are to be visited: Six different locations of the same national mobile phone service provider were chosen, in order to ensure the conformity of the variables considered in the analysed offer. Eligibility condition: the store must have at least three contact front desks to meet their clients.
- Planning the “Mysterious shopping” scenario: As it can easily be observed, all the stores registered fourteen visits each, one visit from every mystery shopper, in the exact time schedule.

Table no. 1 Mysterious clients' visit schedule. Week 1

Store	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
M1	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7
M2	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S1
M3	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S1	S2
M4	S4	S5	S6	S7	S1	S2	S3
M5	S5	S6	S7	S1	S2	S3	S4
M6	S6	S7	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5

Table no. 2 Mysterious clients' visit schedule. Week 2

Store	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
M1	S8	S9	S3	S11	S12	S13	S14
M2	S9	S10	S11	S12	S13	S14	S8
M3	S10	S11	S12	S13	S14	S8	S9
M4	S11	S12	S13	S14	S8	S9	S10
M5	S12	S13	S14	S8	S9	S10	S11
M6	S13	S14	S8	S9	S10	S11	S12

- Setting the scenario

„The client pays monthly a four Euros phone subscription (contract concluded in 2003) and he would give up this subscription, for another one, even more expensive. The client does not know the details of the current offer, or the differences/advantages of another type of subscription. Still, he/she has maximum monthly budget of ten Euros, and he/she does not want to exceed it.”

- Determining the main focus points in evaluating the stores.
- Processing of the data from the forms: the processing of the data was unitary and centralized, by using special programmes (SPSS 13.0).
- The research period: between the 14th and 27th of June 2011. Data collecting tool: The forms. It was structured in chapters for two reasons: on the one hand for a better fulfilment of the research objectives and hypotheses, and, on the other, because of the efficiency criteria in organizing the answers. The questions were asked so that they could diminish as much as possible the subjectivity of the answers and correctly measure the perception and opinions of the individuals.

Collecting and processing data: The data were collected by the fifteen mystery-shoppers. The information were taken and processed in Excel, for graphics and frequencies table, and SPSS 13.0 – for database drawing and determining the statistic data.

4. THE RESULTS OF THE STUDY

Hypothesis 1: To verify the hypothesis, a correlation index was calculated through Hi2 method, as the analysed variables are described through nominal scales. There were not identified significant differences regarding the influence of the cleanliness outside the store on the time spent within it (sig. 0.802), and the level of the resulted correlation index was of 0.142 – that would indicate a positive correlation of minimum intensity between the time spent in the store area and the cleanliness outside it.

There were not identified significant differences regarding the influence of the cleanliness inside the store on the time spent within it (sig. 0.905), and the level of the resulted correlation index was of 0.113 – that would indicate a positive correlation of minimum intensity between the time spent in the store and the cleanliness inside it.

Hypothesis 2: From all the 81 registered answers, 63 consider the environment in the stores as being friendly, and only 18 consider it unfriendly.

Hypothesis 3: The cleanliness outside the stores predicts, to a very small extent, the overall evaluation of the visit. The connection between the two variables is direct and positive but of a very low value (a correlation coefficient of 0.271), guaranteed by a probability of almost 98%. As regards the cleanliness within the stores, there could not be pointed out a clear connection between it and the overall evaluation of the visit (sig. 0.885), the resulted coefficient being around 0 values (0.120).

Hypothesis 4: In order to determine whether there was a connection between the analysed variables, a Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated (continuous variables). There was highlighted a very strong connection between the two variables, with a correlation coefficient of 0.7 – meaning, a very strong, direct correlation coefficient.

Hypothesis 5: It can be noticed that the nil hypothesis cannot be confirmed, so we can state that the employees' knowing very well the current offer, determines an appropriate behaviour which meet the customers' needs. A direct, positive and, at the same time, strong connection was proved (0.464 – Cramer).

Hypothesis 6: There was highlighted a very strong connection between the two variables analysed, with a correlation coefficient of 0.713 – meaning, a very strong, direct and positive correlation.

Hypothesis 7: It can be noticed that no significant connections can be revealed between the variables analysed, so there is no connection between the welcome greeting and the evaluation of the employees' competences.

Hypotheses 8, 10, 12: It can be stated that there is no significant connection between the analysed variables.

Hypothesis 9: There was highlighted a significant direct and positive connection between the two variables analysed, of medium intensity (correlation coefficient of 0,428). So, it can be stated that, the sales consultant's approach towards a customer significantly contributes to the reinforcement of the overall evaluation of the visit.

Hypothesis 11: So, if there is to be a connection (sig. 0.078), it is of low intensity – given by a correlation index of 0.274. It can be said that the time spent in the store grows along with the sales consultant's effort in convincing the customer.

Hypothesis 13: It was, thus, demonstrated a direct, positive connection, but of a medium intensity at the same time (0.345 – Cramer).

Hypothesis 14: There was highlighted a direct, positive connection (sig. 0.078) but of a medium intensity (0.322) between the variables analysed.

Hypothesis 15: In determining the overall evaluation visit, it is very important the way in which the sales consultants present the current offer to their customers.

5. RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

- The objective of the research. The purpose of this research was to evaluate, in two weeks' time, the quality of the services supplied by the sales consultants from six mobile phone service store providers. This period was maybe too short for the information to be relevant.

- The quality of the mystery-shoppers. There has to be assumed a certain level of subjectivity, because of the different perceptions of the 15 individuals. At the same time, the need to adjust the personal schedules of the mystery - shoppers, led to a different result of the visits than the one expected at the beginning of the study.

- Three visits skipped. Three visits could not be made because of objective circumstances: a) In one case, one of the stores was stock-taking.

- b) In the other two cases, the mystery-shopper was on business trip, and the visits could not be performed by other mystery-shoppers

- Deviations from the initial scenario. For not being discovered, the mystery-shoppers had the freedom of improvising their own scenario. Various difference in the behaviour of the aimed sales consultants' were noticed, this depending exclusively on the mystery-shoppers' abilities.

- Filling and sending the evaluation forms. The evaluation forms were filled in maximum 5 minutes after the mystery-shoppers' leaving the store, in a printed format; then it was necessary to put the answers in an electronic format, to be sent by email. Besides, reading again the answers, the respondents might have “modified” them, for a next evaluation of the store's performance.

- There can also be data introduction and interpretation limitations, because of a large amount of data and the usage of a complex software programme as SPSS 13.0.

The research ethics. The ethical issues of the „Mystery-shopping” programme are according to the ones described in the ethical code of the International Marketing Association ESOMAR.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The results obtained can be presented to the managers as the exact opinions of some clients that have really benefited from the services provided and are able to evaluate the quality of these services. Because the companies in Iasi are at the beginning of their developing a client-oriented strategy, they hesitate in applying an examination process of the customers' perception (Agheorghiesei, 2011), either because they are not aware of the importance of the feedback, or they are reluctant to the answers they might get. This kind of research may be considered a solution for increasing the quality of the services provided by organizations.

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