

Add a little 'mystery' to the interview process

Uncover candidate interview pitfalls and achieve a positive reputation for your organization

From the moment a job applicant calls or walks into one of your facilities, an impression of the community, either positive or negative, is formed. This impression continues based on several factors, including the courtesy and cordiality of the receptionist; the length of the wait before the interview; the welcome offered by the interviewer; the questions asked; the perceived interest, skill, and professionalism of the interviewer; and the information and messages that are conveyed about the facility, company, staff, and job.

How can you be sure that job applicants leave with the best possible impression? What if negative feelings were created during the interview process that caused the best managers or caregivers to go elsewhere? How can you monitor procedures to reduce the likelihood of desirable candidates choosing to work for a competitor? If your company maintains multiple facilities, how can you be sure that all of your facilities adhere to its guidelines for interviewing candidates?

These questions can be difficult to answer. Staffing issues sometimes plague the very best long-term care organizations, and the hiring process may involve multiple interviews or processes. When problems arise, pinpointing the direct cause can be like looking for a needle in a haystack. This is where a mystery shopping firm can help.

Mystery Shopping Helps to Maximize the Interview Process

What is a mystery shopping firm? It is a company that hires "undercover" people to contact their client by posing as a regular customer or, in this case, a job applicant.

Before the assignment begins, the mystery shopper is provided with a detailed scenario that enables him or her to be perceived as a bona fide applicant and respond to the client's need for information. If the mystery shopper is applying for a position such as a registered nurse or a manager, a "real" RN or manager would be engaged to complete the assignment.

After "shopping," the applicant completes a questionnaire and narrative account for each phase of the assignment on how the client's employees fulfilled their job requirements and the impressions formed during the calls and visits. While many

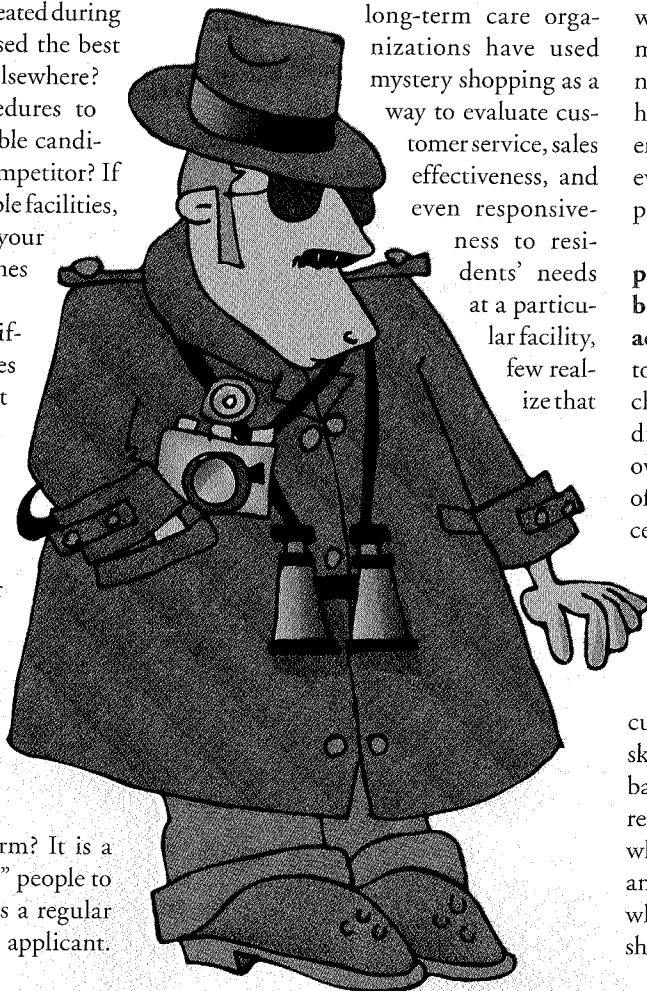
long-term care organizations have used mystery shopping as a way to evaluate customer service, sales effectiveness, and even responsiveness to residents' needs at a particular facility, few realize that

mystery shopping is also a great tool to discover and monitor the effectiveness of the candidate interviewing process.

A mystery shopping project can determine if your staff is presenting a realistic preview of the job. It can also represent your facilities, company, and employees in a positive, professional, and inviting way. If it is not, there can be far-reaching consequences for your company—beyond the scope of the individual interview. Each candidate interview is an opportunity for staff to create a positive public image for your organization. Candidates who have negative experiences will discuss them with others. As a result, the best prospects may seek employment elsewhere. Skilled nursing facilities, in particular, sometimes have difficulty recruiting the best caregivers. Therefore, if your reputation becomes even slightly tarnished, it can create staffing problems for years to come.

Mystery shopping helps to ensure that policies, procedures, and guidelines are being followed and used to your best advantage. Actual candidates are unlikely to provide this feedback, especially if they choose to work for a competitor. It can be difficult for your personnel to assess their own performance and, without some form of monitoring, you may be unaware that certain practices are creating unnecessary problems.

Interviewing requires effort, concentration, and practice. Staff must stay on schedule, maintain the proper image, build rapport, and consistently convey the culture of your organization. Interviewing skills also involve gathering the same general background data from each candidate and remembering what each candidate said, while evaluating their knowledge, skills, and abilities. Mystery shopping can pinpoint what aspects of the interview process fall short or are not working.



Mystery shoppers can evaluate any number of criteria to provide feedback about what is happening in real time during the interview process and what messages are being conveyed about your company and its culture. For example, while management may have standardized the application and interviewing procedures, you might be surprised to discover that these procedures are inconsistently applied. Without feedback, you may be unaware that interviews are actually being conducted in varying and/or unstructured ways. Standardized questions may be skipped or asked in random order. Applicants may not be asked enough about their previous experience and may be hired primarily on a gut level. Interviewers may ask inappropriate personal questions of the candidates, which could create "bad evidence."

Choosing a Mystery Shopping Firm

While keeping costs down is always an important consideration, it will not be cost-effective if the firm selected does not have the expertise to properly conduct the mystery shopping assessment. Assessing your interview process is an important and sensitive project. There are privacy issues, mystery shopper qualification issues, and role-playing requirements to consider, as well as the quality of the reports. Not everyone is a good mystery shopper, and a qualified firm will recruit individuals with the appropriate backgrounds and train them to know exactly what to look for at your facilities; how to assess the performance criteria in the questionnaires; and how to write detailed, informative, and meaningful reports.

You must ensure that the project remains anonymous and provides a comprehensive assessment that can be used to make practical and valuable improvements. An experienced mystery shopping firm knows how to get results unobtrusively. After all, if your staff suspects that the interviewee is not a legitimate job candidate, the project will be a waste of money and time.

Using your employees as your mystery shoppers is often a mistake. The mystery shoppers not only need to be comfortable with role playing, but must be able to be objective about the facilities they evaluate.

Typical Questions About the Interview Process

Numerous questions about the candidate interview process can be answered by mystery shoppers in their reports. Below are a few examples:

- Was the person answering the phone courteous and helpful?
- Was the interview scheduled in a courteous and accommodating manner?
- Who gave the candidate the application form, and was it a "clean" copy?
- Was the application explained to the candidate?
- If any tests were given at the interview, were they job related?
- Did the interviewer review the application/resume before the interview?
- Was the interviewer familiar with the job duties of the open position?
- Could the interviewer communicate the job duties in an understandable way?
- Did the interviewer have questions prepared?
- Did the interviewer ask open-ended questions?
- Did the interviewer ask any inappropriate questions?
- Did the interviewer allow the applicant to do most of the talking?
- Did the interviewer allow the applicant to ask questions?
- Did the interviewer discuss benefits when describing the community and the company?
- Did the interviewer properly close the interview?
- If the applicant was rejected, how was he/she notified?

Even if the employees are from distant sister facilities, the fact that they work for your company compromises their objectivity.

What Mystery Shopping Can (and Cannot) Do

Remember that each mystery shopping evaluation is an instant snapshot of the candidate interview at a specific time. Snapshots don't always capture us looking our best, but they do capture the immediacy of the moment, helping to identify problem areas.

Conversely, mystery shopping cannot be expected to show what happens on a *consistent* basis at any facility or with any specific employee—unless it is done frequently. To gain a comprehensive, consistent view of candidate interviewing, it is necessary to commit to periodic mystery shopping evaluations. While a single project will pinpoint areas in which you can implement changes, only regular mystery shopping will show patterns of progress and allow you to evaluate improvements after you have adjusted your procedures.

Mystery shopping offers a real picture of what candidates experience when they apply for positions at your facilities. It is one of the most effective ways to find out which practices are working, whether your policies and procedures are being followed, and what messages are being conveyed about your organization. If you suspect problems with your candidate interview process, mystery shopping will help to pinpoint the source of these problems. If you are losing candidates to competitors but don't know why, mystery shopping can help identify practices that may be causing the problem. Or if you would just like invaluable feedback to improve your overall recruitment results, mystery shopping can act as a catalyst for change. ■

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