

# Industry Undercover

Mystery shopping in the attractions industry is increasing.

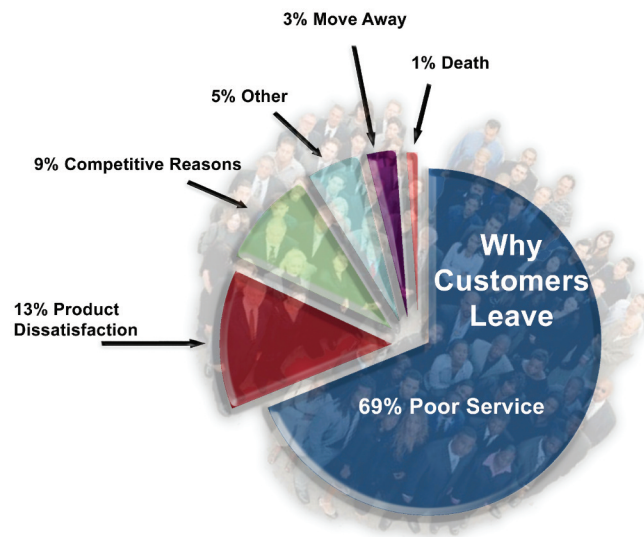
Is it right for your facility?

by Keith Miller

**M**ost parks and attractions realize the need for feedback from their guests, and many provide outlets for providing comments. But guest surveys are limited, and they rely on the willingness of the guest to be honest and to make time available to respond. Unless facilities employ mystery shoppers.

One of the leading mystery shopping providers to the amusement industry is Amusement Advantage, located in Arvada, Colorado. Scot Carson, the company's president, started the firm with his wife, Christine, back in 1996 after working several years for an amusement park. "I'd worked at Elitch Gardens in Denver for years, and my wife and I had done mystery shopping and thought it was something that wasn't being done [in the industry]," he says. "No one was [evaluating] guest satisfaction in the way we thought it should be done, so we decided to do it."





Like many of these providers, Amusement Advantage tailors its programs to fit the client. It evaluates guest service, safety, loss prevention, and value for the guest. Carson says they will also evaluate individual rides and attractions, but usually just with regard to the employees and the cleanliness. "There is a little about the enjoyment of the attraction, but that's not the focus," he notes.

### What Parks and Attractions Want

When an attraction of any type—amusement, education, or otherwise—approaches a mystery shopping company, it's usually looking for information beyond what staff can gather themselves. "They're looking to get unbiased third-party objective feedback," Carson explains. "It's outside feedback, not a supervisor who's saying things. And it's not just negative feedback—we want to catch employees doing things right and set that as an example."

Dayna Sanchez is in business development with National Shopping Service (NSS) in Rocklin, California, which provides mystery shopping services, data collection, and compliance and audit inspections for amusement parks

and other establishments in 25 countries, and she has an idea what an attraction may be looking for from a mystery shopping company.

"There are a ton of different things," she says, "and they may be running several programs at one time. They may want to evaluate kiosks and see if they are serving guests well; they may be looking at the overall [guest] interaction from beginning to end—parking, admission, getting in and using bathrooms, etc.; they may want us to interview clients or customers to see what the park can do to improve the service, or they may want us to go to specific shops and evaluate customer service."

Since customization to an attraction's needs is important, these firms first find out all they can about the facility. "We'll ask what they're looking for, then we do a work agreement," says Sanchez. "Then we build the questionnaires and show them materials that demonstrate what we do. Typically it takes two to four weeks to be up and running and shopping."

Dan Aylward, president and general manager of Magic Springs and Crystal Falls in Hot Springs, Arkansas, consulted Amusement Advantage in 2006 after receiving disappointing results from another method. "We were using some local people before," remarks Aylward, "but they really weren't as disciplined in what they gave in the reports and in what we could get out of them as Amusement Advantage, which has more structure and has been totally reliable."

Aylward says he had Amusement Advantage's mystery shoppers go to and use the park's web site, make phone calls to the park to get information, then go through the front-gate turnstiles and into the park to experience everything, just as a normal guest would.

Some parks and attractions want the mystery shopper to go through the entire guest experience and evaluate all aspects of it. But others, like Morey's Piers in Wildwood, New Jersey, have specific concerns in mind.

"We were looking for [shoppers] who'd never been here before, but frequent amusement parks," says Dino Fazio, director of operations at Morey's Piers. "We wanted to hear about our waterparks, our piers, our pricing programs, and admission options."



Some facilities employ mystery shoppers to evaluate the entire guest experience: food service, bathrooms—the works.



## What Mystery Shoppers Do

The initial setup process for an attraction is fairly simple and not time-consuming, according to Aylward. His park did this initial work a couple of years ago and has followed the same basic format ever since.

Once the mystery shopping company knows what the attraction wants, it's time to go shopping. Carson says the mystery shoppers that Amusement Advantage uses are independent contractors, and many gain certification by the Mystery Shopper Providers Association.

Sanchez notes NSS uses both experienced and inexperienced shoppers, depending upon what the attraction wants. "If the park wants only people who have been to parks, that's what we use," she says. "But if they want first-time experiences, we choose those who've not been to a park."

Then the shoppers are dispatched and instructed to look at things just as a guest would. "They pretty much do everything," asserts Carson. "They're expected to spend six to eight hours there. They go from parking to guest services, watch shows, play games, ride rides, look for a manager, look for security, go to first aid—everything. They will also ask employees specific questions about things to evaluate their knowledge."



Above left, a mystery shopper with a PDA. Right, a mystery shopper entering data.



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—Scot Carson, Amusement Advantage

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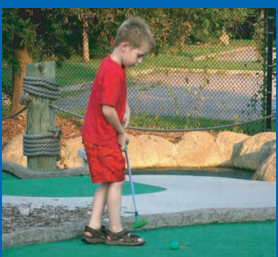
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The shoppers use mobile phones with cameras, digital voice recorders, PDAs, and digital cameras to document what they see. Some will also have Wi-Fi access to report results back immediately.

Since kids are a vital customer base for many attractions, their feedback must be captured. But it's obviously difficult for a young person to be a certified mystery shopper. "We can send families in as mystery shoppers," reveals Carson. "Mom or Dad is in charge of the mystery shopping, but they capture feedback from the kids. Some parks have an absolute requirement that the shoppers have kids."

### Vital Results

Once the shopping is over, the results are compiled and reports provided to the attraction. "It generally takes about 72 hours, then [attractions] can start seeing the results," says Sanchez. "Everything we do is online, so they log in as a client and have several different tabs. It has a hierarchy, so the senior management can see everything, but the food department, for example, can only see reports on their department. They can also filter the reports based on scoring. They can filter for the highest responses, the lowest responses, or a range."

The reports can be wide-ranging and specific. "We provide recorded phone calls to evaluate a certain department, like group sales," says Carson. "We offer digital photos of additional documentation, such as workers who don't have their name tag on, unsafe or unclean conditions, bathrooms that are a mess, employees misbehaving, etc. We now offer exit surveys of guests at a facility done with a PDA."

Aylward says the reports give Magic Springs and Crystal Falls an unbiased look at their employees and operations, and they show what's working and what's not and allow them to reinforce the positive. "We get about a 13-page report," he says. "It tells us about signage, attitudes of employees, and how employees handle situations. We have [shoppers] interact with our supervisors and managers, and give us feedback on how they handle that. If there's something they feel is unsafe, they report that as well."

Fazio says these reports helped Morey's Piers make important changes. "We learned that when we first started, in general, the evaluators found our staff to be about average, which is not good enough for me!" he says. "So we've tried to tweak our guest services program—we made some adjustments. Also, there were comments on our admissions and options, so we've made changes to our admission programs and our signage, and those issues have gone away."

Aylward says mystery shopping has limitations but sees it as essential nonetheless: "It gives you a snapshot at a particular time, but you can't take that and say across the board everyone has the same experience because they don't. It can't replace surveys and it can't replace management supervision. But I think it's something you can't afford not to do. Especially for a small park, it's important to have someone take an outside look." ■

## 10 Things for Attractions to Consider When Implementing a Mystery Shopping Program

**Staff Roll-Out**—Team members must understand the purpose of the program as well as the specific evaluation criteria being used.

**Employee Incentives**—Keeping the program positive by rewarding those employees named as "Outstanding Team Member" with public recognition among their peers and a prize or award can have a powerful impact on the overall success of the program.

**Leadership Staff**—The more engaged frontline supervisors and managers can be in developing and modifying the program, the more buy-in can be achieved.

**Who Are Mystery Shoppers?**—Mystery shoppers are regular guests who use their observation and communication skills to evaluate the attraction through the eyes of a regular guest.

**Customize Criteria**—Customize the evaluation criteria as much as possible to ensure appropriate results.

**Realistic Expectations**—Keep the evaluation criteria realistic and manageable to garner more accurate results.

**Perception Is Reality**—Recognize that observations will vary from one shopper to the next.

**Project Coordinator**—Establish a single point of contact as the liaison for departmental managers and the mystery shopping company to enable smooth communication and help maintain the overall program goals and objectives.

**Avoid the Guessing**—Encourage team members to treat all guests as though they are mystery shoppers and discourage attempted identification of mystery shoppers.

**Name Tags**—Ensure team members wear name-tags in a consistent prominent location for proper reporting.

—Courtesy Amusement Advantage